A ROME OF ONE'S OWN

The Forgotten Women of the Roman Empire

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Agrippina: Empress, Exile, Hustler, Whore
A Fatal Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum: Murder in Ancient Rome

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‘I read [history] a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.’

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

‘Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.’

Virginia Woolf

‘Don’t take no for an answer. Argue with silence.’

Amy Richlin

For Professor Mary Harlow and my mum: the women who shaped me.

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Introduction

There is a story from the 1970s often told by Roman historians of gender. It goes like this: students at an American college approached their male professor, a revered Roman historian, to request a course on women in Roman history. They, being among the first women ever to study ancient history at this university, wanted to see themselves on their syllabus. Their professor disagreed. To their dismay, he replied that he may as well do a course on Roman dogs.[1] The professor's meaning was clear: women have no place in history. History is not about women, or children or non-binary people or indeed dogs. History, to him and to an awful lot of people, is the Doing of Important Things. It is winning battles and having Important Opinions In Public. History is politics and public deeds. Women don't make history.

The history of the Roman Empire is usually told in this mould. It starts with Romulus, moves through Brutus overthrowing Tarquin, bounces through an appallingly tedious list of expansionist battles and generals and consuls, before emerging into the political stab-fest of the Late Republic. From there, it runs through all the emperors, occasionally mentioning a wife or mother to show how badly things can go when women take control, until Constantine invents Christianity and then Attila the Hun rolls up and ruins it. But the history of Rome and its empire is so much more than just emperors and politicians and generals. History is so much more than Important Things. You and I, right now, are living through history. In the future, history books will be written about the times we live in, and we won't be in them because we (mostly) do not do Important Things. History, though, still includes us. It includes women who are not prime ministers or queens or capital-I Important. History happens to women (and men) as much as they make it.

This book, then, is a revisionist history of the Roman Empire with Important Things relegated to the background. This is a history of the things the Roman male historians and biographers never wanted to write about and certainly didn't want *us* to be writing about. This is a history of the things the Roman history writers designated as domestic, feminine, boring and worthless. It is a history of individuals, because, to quote Svetlana Alexievich, 'this miniature expanse: one person, the individual. It's where everything really happens.'[2] This is a history of Rome, from its foundation in 753 BCE to the fall of the last western Roman emperor in 476 CE, through the lives of women you have probably never heard of. These women are Vestal Virgins and sex workers, they are business owners and poets, martyrs and saints. Only four are rulers or officially involved in Important Things. Each of them tells a different story of the Roman Empire as it grew from belligerent city state to immense empire and then shrank into warring states; from polytheistic Republic to emperor-worshipping monarchy to Christian superpower.

By focusing on women, we discover a whole new history of the Roman Empire, one where marriage is as important as war and where what it is to be Roman is constantly being reassessed. Many of the women in this book never set foot in Italy, let alone Rome. Several considered themselves to be enemies of the Romans; others considered themselves thoroughly Roman but were treated as enemies.

Including women in history forces us, as historians, to re-evaluate what a Roman was, what Romanness was, and to confront the immense scope of the Roman Empire. Including women deepens our understanding of Roman history and Roman life. When Romulus founded Rome, he knew that his city would not be complete until it included women; the history of Rome is equally incomplete without them.

THE KINGDOM

Tarpeia and Hersilia

750 BCE

The Traitor and the Patriot

In the beginning, there was a wall. Built by Romulus at the top of the Capitoline Hill, breached by his brother Remus, protected by Romulus and baptised with Remus's blood on 7 April 753 BCE. The legend served as a warning: Romulus's walls were sacred and any incursion would be punished swiftly and brutally. Next, came a city state called Rome with Romulus as its king. Romulus claimed to be the son of Mars. He claimed the god had raped his mother, Rhea Silvia, to ensure the royal line would not be ended by her lifelong virginity. In this story we learn that, to the Romans, a bloodline is more important than an individual woman.

To fill his city, Romulus opened his gates to fugitives from other Italian cities, to people escaping slavery, to fortune seekers and risk takers and anyone curious enough to show up. To those who came he offered citizenship, sanctuary from the consequences of crimes committed elsewhere and freedom to enslaved men. And men came in their droves. When he had enough, Romulus instituted a hierarchy (because god, did Romans love a hierarchy) and created a Senate of one hundred of his favourites. This Senate he called Fathers (*patres*) and their job was to advise him, to guide him and to do his admin. The descendants of these first hundred men were known as Patricians, the most revered and respected class of families in Rome.[1] Romulus embedded this hierarchy into his brand new society from the start. Remember this because we will come back to it in a couple of chapters.

In order to have descendants, however, these Patricians and all the other newly minted Romans needed wives. For wives, they needed women. Like all new spaces that seem full of opportunity for those who have little to lose (the Wild West, cryptocurrencies), early Rome primarily attracted men of a – shall we say – challenging temperament. In Rome's case, this occurred because Romulus offered citizenship, freedom and sanctuary only to men, explicitly excluding women from his welcome package. All these male criminals and adventure-seekers and men fleeing enslavement made for an exciting and unpredictable place to be, but they did not make for a stable or long-lasting city state. As Romulus watched young, bright-eyed men arrive day after day he knew that if Rome couldn't provide them with wives and futures, then all his new male citizens would eventually wander off, leaving his big, new city dead and crumbling before it celebrated its first birthday.

Before we go on, we need to have a chat about the available sources for the mythical beginnings of the Eternal City. The surviving works of two authors provide the major narratives of Rome's earliest centuries: Titus Livius and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. The former we know better as Livy, an Italian historian who lived between 56 BCE and 17 CE and wrote his history of Rome from foundation to his modern day under the all-seeing eye of the first emperor Augustus. He produced his history as a friend of Augustus in order to help shape and define Roman identity during a time of immense social and cultural upheaval.[2] But he also wrote at a time when Rome appeared to have reached its pinnacle. The Rome that Livy experienced was rich beyond imagining and controlled an empire

of several million square miles. The Rome Livy knew referred to the entire Mediterranean as *mare nostrum* – our sea. He claims that he chose to write his history of Rome because the unstoppable rise of Roman power seemed, to him, to be the most shining example of good things happening to good people. Rome succeeded because Romans deserved it. He worried, however, that luxury and greed posed a threat to the Rome of his time, that he was living during a 'downward plunge' in Roman morality, and so he wrote his history to give his readers examples of good and bad behaviour, and encouraged them to 'choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result.'[3] This ethical mission drove the selection and presentation of his stories about the most ancient Roman past.

The latter source is Dionysius of Halicarnassus's *Roman Antiquities.* Dionysius arrived in Rome from Halicarnassus in modern-day Turkey in 29 BCE in order to learn as much about the Romans, whom he perceived to be foreign, as he could and write about them for readers in the Greek-speaking world east of the Mediterranean.[4] He spent, by his own account, two decades living in Rome as a proto-anthropologist and eventually published his book in 7 BCE, also during the reign of Augustus. He chose to write a history of Rome from its foundation up to the wars with Carthage because he believed this was 'a subject noble, lofty and useful to many', again through its provision of examples of good behaviour. He also aimed to explain to his Greek readers just how exactly 'the supremacy of the Romans has far surpassed all those that are recorded from earlier times.'[5] Like Livy, he wanted to make sense of Rome's power.

Most of what we know about approximately the first half-millennium of Roman history comes from these two blokes, both of whom wrote during the exact same decades, in the exact same court, experiencing the exact same cultural milieu and for largely the same purpose. Although Dionysius wanted to explain Roman supremacy to those they had colonised while Livy wanted to explain Roman supremacy to his dissolute peers, they both wanted to present a linear narrative of Roman history that rationalised constant success in war and money-making as a reward for good behaviour. Both wanted to define that good behaviour and offer it up as a set of moral exemplars for their readers. This is why the Romans won … this is why the gods love them … this is what you need to do to win. In every story we are about to read in the next five chapters, there is very much a moralising self-help undertone that cannot be ignored.

There are a few other sources, including Ovid's epic poems the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses*, in which he both creates and records Roman myth, and Plutarch's biographies of great Roman men. The *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* were also written in the decades of Augustus's reign, while Plutarch lived around 100 CE and spent his adult life travelling between Athens and Boeotia in Greece. All these authors wrote to explain the modern world they lived in, to find significance and meaning for their experiences in the Roman past. Although they drew on older sources (and sometimes even named them), they picked their stories and presented them in such a way as to be meaningful to their modern readers, as all historians do; as I did when I picked the stories I am telling you here. Most importantly for this book: when the ancient writers chose to put women in their stories, they were making an explicit choice and statement.

It is absolutely possible to recount the entire early history of Rome up until the Late Republic with mention of only a single woman. The only one you can't really cut out entirely is Lucretia, but everyone else is very much optional and most

modern histories of Rome do choose to excise the women I am about to talk about in order to focus on their husbands and fathers. But when Romans mentioned women in their histories, it was never by accident, it always had meaning and we are here to find out what that meaning was. The first women of Rome, the Sabine women, for example, explained and described the origins and purpose of Roman marriage.[6]

Which brings us back to Romulus, in his city of rough men and his desperate need for women. Romulus's first strategy to gather women was a bold one – all his plans were bold ones. He sent envoys to all the surrounding city states in Italy like Crustumium and Caenina and Antemna and simply asked for wives. The Romans rather liked to portray their Italian neighbours as one-dimensional antagonists, but these were sophisticated, ancient city states. The pre-Roman people of Italy, like the Sabines who inhabited at least six cities in Lazio and Umbria, and the Etruscans who dominated Italy from about the eighth century BCE, were long-established, complex societies with cities and literature and rich histories and a strong sense of their own place in the universe. They were incredibly surprised, then, when these Roman upstarts showed up and asked them for their daughters' hands in marriage. In return, Romulus offered to these venerable peoples an alliance with the new city state and the pleasure of intermarrying with his Romans.[7] So basically, just the marriage. The kings of the Sabines and Etruscans and their leading men responded exactly as you perhaps would if someone sneezed into their hand and then tried to shake yours with the snot still dripping from their fingers. They recoiled in obvious revulsion. The older, fully established states of central Italy saw Rome as a grotesque, largely uncivilised folly – full of criminals and men who had previously been enslaved (posing a very serious problem) and led by a man who had killed his own brother. They absolutely would not be sending any of their lovely daughters over to hang out with the Romans. From the very start, the way the Romans saw themselves (divinely descended, the height of civilisation, practically perfect in every way) did not often overlap at all with the way they were seen by outsiders (terrifying, borderline genocidal, completely unreasonable and quite, quite deluded). Instead, over and over these rulers asked the envoys the obvious question: why didn't Romulus offer sanctuary to women and attract women to Rome of their own accord? Let the women of Italy choose to come to Rome and choose to marry Roman men. Give women the same opportunity to escape slavery or prosecution or simple boredom and start a new life. If you need women, mate, let women into your city.

Romulus, hilariously, took this suggestion as a gross insult. Formerly enslaved men or bandit men or murderous men were one thing: a *man* could transcend his start in life. A criminal or formerly enslaved woman, however, was forever ruined and Romulus would rather have no women than have one who had left a difficult situation in Collatia. Romulus was bloody awful obviously, but then Roman men all were.

The response to the suggestion that women be allowed to arrive in Rome alone and of their own free will highlights how different the rules for women and female behaviour were in the ancient Mediterranean, and how embedded those rules came to be in Roman culture. The idea that a woman be allowed to choose to arrive in Rome as a free individual struck Livy as genuinely ludicrous because women, in Roman historical narratives and political culture, did not exist as individuals and could not be allowed the same agency as men. Women existed as daughters, wives and mothers, as relations to men, and they could arrive only if men moved them, like chess pieces. This is why Romulus and his tiny band of Romans decided that a

much better option than attracting women who wanted to marry them and live in Rome was simply to kidnap some women they wanted and force them to be their wives.

And so, finally, we reach the first Roman woman. Almost. Until this point in the Romans' own telling of their mythical history only a handful of women have appeared. The wives and lovers of Rome's grandfather Aeneas, whom he continually abandoned to die without so much as a backward glance, were Trojan (Creusa), Carthaginian (Dido) and Latin (Lavinia). Romulus and Remus's birth mother (Rhea Silvia) and foster mother (Larentia) were both Alban. Romans acknowledged these women as their ancestors but not as Romans themselves. The first woman with a name to live in the city of Rome was Hersilia, who started her life as a Sabine woman, born and raised in the Apennine mountains.[8] There is no single version of Hersilia or her story, and she is rarely mentioned in modern retellings of Roman beginnings, but she is a vital part of the story of the foundation of Rome, and so every ancient telling includes her, because the story of the foundation of Rome is also the story of the creation of Roman society, including Roman marriage. Hersilia was Rome's first wife. In some versions of her story, she is an older woman, the mother of a teenage daughter. In others, she is a young woman herself, virginal and unmarried. In all versions, she is an attendee at the most notorious party in Roman history.

The story goes like this: having been rejected by every town within riding distance, Romulus decided that he would just take the women he wanted. Riding into established towns with his brand new army to scoop up girls by force was clearly a bad plan, though, so he devised a scheme to bring the ladies to him. He began, according to Dionysius, by claiming to have discovered an ancient altar to the god Consus (also called Equestrian Neptune) buried under the Roman hills. He thus announced that he would be instituting a new festival to honour this new ancient god: the Consualia on 21 August in either the first or fourth year after the foundation of the city.[9] He sent invites to all the most important families from all the nearby towns that had previously scorned him and promised them a banging party. And, out of politeness and curiosity and begrudging piety to a new god, some came. Several towns from Latium sent delegations but by far the most enthusiastic were the Sabines, who arrived as full family parties in their hundreds.[10] The Sabine families toured this strange new city, traipsing up and down the Roman hills, they accepted the food and hospitality of Romulus's followers, they sat in the Circus Maximus to watch a grand display of chariot racing, spectacles and sacrifices. And then, when Romulus gave his secret signal, they watched in horror as the Romans drew their swords, grabbed their sisters and daughters and granddaughters and nieces by their hair and dragged them screaming from the circus. The numbers of women taken on this day vary wildly, and include very specific numbers like 30, 527 and 683, and very vague estimates like 'somewhat greater than thirty' and 'nearly eight hundred'.[11] Amongst these Sabine women, the only one to be granted a name and a voice by the Roman historians was Hersilia.

In the chaos that followed, the Romans chased the Sabine men out of the city and then parcelled out the women amongst themselves. One of the major purposes of this story for the Romans of the Augustan era was explaining why Roman weddings traditionally included celebratory cries of '*talasius!*' Onlookers and celebrants in Rome shouted this word at the bride and groom during weddings, but no one knew what the word meant. So, every version of the rape of the Sabine women includes a 'Just So Story' about its meaning and purpose. In Livy's telling, it derived from a man named Talasius who had, during the Consualia, marked out a

particularly beautiful young girl as his own. When the attack started, he charged his men with ensuring that no one else grabbed her first. As they carried the unnamed girl to him, they shouted out that she was off limits to other Romans because she was being taken to Talasius, and thus the wedding cry was born.[12] Creepy shit. Plutarch offers several completely different explanations. One is very similar to Livy's but the shout derives from onlookers telling Talasius that he is a very lucky man, wink wink. His own theory is that the cry is completely unrelated to the Sabine women and derives entirely from the Greek word *talasia* meaning come on, work harder, you can do it, which is somehow also very creepy.[13] The point is that Romans told themselves that the form, purpose and celebration of their marriages derived from this mass assault of young women, in a martial act, but also that describing the formation and purpose and celebration of marriage was very important to Roman historians. Marriage was an important act for men, and for the city.

The Sabine kidnappees were handed out to the best and brightest of the unmarried Romans and were then subjected to Romulus going door to door giving them a lecture and trying to defend his actions. He blamed their parents and the leaders of their cities for refusing to negotiate with the Romans, telling the women to be angry at their fathers and not Romulus who, they had to understand, really, really needed women. He told them that they had been taken in marriage, to be their husbands' partners, not their sex slaves or their victims. He promised the women that they would be full citizens of Rome and, in the words of Livy, he gave them 'the greatest privilege of all the human race': their children would also be Roman citizens.[14] Citizenship of a four-year-old city comprised of kidnappers, offered by a man who stabbed his own brother, was perhaps not the kind of gift that these women had ever wanted, but Livy's words were written for readers in the age of Augustus, when Rome was the glory of the Mediterranean and citizenship was an honour bestowed upon the few, so it cheered the women up quite a lot in his telling.

It's worth noting here that while this incident is known to many as the Rape of the Sabine Women, this was not a sexual assault. The Latin word *raptio* is used by the ancient sources to describe the women being violently grabbed and dragged away and this was, whether deliberately or not, converted into the concept of sexual assault and the word 'rape' by Italian Renaissance artists. There is no suggestion of coerced sex in the ancient texts, who rather tend to emphasise the willingness of the Sabine women to become Roman in every way. The most willing of them all was Hersilia. Dionysius describes Hersilia as a woman of good standing among the Sabines who was already married and whose daughter had been targeted by the Romans. As all the other Sabines fled the Roman swords and abandoned their daughters and sisters, Hersilia stayed 'of her own free will' and was thus the only woman in early Roman history who became a Roman voluntarily.[15] It's maybe for this reason that Romulus chose her from all the Sabines to be his wife, and she got to be the first female voice in Roman history and the first wife to use soft power to influence her husband to do the right thing.

Before we fully explore Hersilia's contribution to defining the role of a Roman wife, though, we have to interrupt this broadcast to discuss the wayward Roman daughter, Tarpeia. Because Hersilia can't save Rome until Tarpeia nearly destroys it.

Tarpeia is the closest thing there is to a Roman woman at this point, being the daughter of a Roman man, a Roman general no less. She can't have been born in Rome, but Tarpeia is the only woman we know of who wasn't dragged screaming

into her home. Tarpeia fascinated and perplexed Roman historians, who told and retold her story, exploring it from every possible angle, much like we tell and retell the stories of Snow White or King Arthur over and over, always reconfiguring them to reflect the issues of our own time. But every story needs basic beats to be recognisable, and Tarpeia's story has three. The first is that, in the aftermath of the rape of the Sabine women, Rome was being besieged by Sabine men attempting to rescue their daughters. Each Sabine city organised and sent a separate army to retrieve their women, assuming that Rome was a tiny baby city that they could take easily. But you know what they say about assuming and asses. Initially, the wars went well for the Romans and they cheerfully humiliated a lot of established people who tried to fight them.[16] Eventually, the Sabines realised that the Romans would require a collective effort, came together in a coalition against Rome and chose Titus Tatius to be their leader. Very quickly, Tatius drove the Romans back behind their city walls and besieged them for an unspecified amount of time. The Roman sources are amusingly hand-wavy over this part of the story, tending to skip from Tatius agreeing to lead the coalition to Rome being besieged with a yada yada yada over how they got there and how many losses may have been suffered on the way.

The second beat of Tarpeia's story is her role in ending this siege. Specifically, that she deliberately opened the city gates and let the Sabines in while the Romans slept. Where the stories diverge a lot is in how and why she did this. Tarpeia's motivations tormented the Romans. Was she a traitor, who sold out her own city? Was she a hero who tricked the Sabines? Was she a stolen Sabine daughter trying to get back to her father, or a Roman maiden terrorised into betraying her city, or a young woman in love with the handsome foreign king?[17] At various points in Roman history, she was all these things. Her story survives in six Roman sources spanning two-and-a-half centuries and each contains a different Tarpeia. Some sources contain four or five different Tarpeias. Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch list every version of the myth they have read in all the histories now lost to us and few overlap.[18] Tarpeia confused Roman historians because the most common version of Tarpeia's motivation said that she was a greedy little girl who sold out her city for gold, and yet every year Romans celebrated and sacrificed to Tarpeia at her grave in the Capitol, the most sacred centre of Rome. This dichotomy tortured Roman writers. They simply could not reconcile the prevailing version of the past (that Tarpeia was a traitor) with their own present (where sacrifices were annually made to her). Eventually, in a moment of profound giving up, Dionysius of Halicarnassus declared, 'Let everyone judge of the matter as he please' and simply moved on.[19]

Of all the many renditions of this beat of the story, the one that repeats the most often is that Tarpeia was a young girl and the daughter of Tarpeius, the man whom Romulus had entrusted with the protection of the Capitol.[20] One day, Tarpeia left the city walls to collect water (in some versions she was a Vestal Virgin), and while doing so she caught sight of the Sabine soldiers hanging around. As part of their traditional costume, the Sabines all wore large gold bracelets and big gold rings. While this may bring to mind an image of a hoard of *Sopranos* extras sporting signet rings, I'm sure they were much more dignified than that. The gold entranced Tarpeia because women are like magpies who love sparkles. She also lived in a Rome where, in the minds of male writers in the Late Republic, luxury and decadence and jewellery had not yet been invented, largely because it had no women. Fascinated, Tarpeia approached Tatius and offered him a deal: she would open the gates to the city for him and in return he and every man would give her 'what he wore on his left arm'. The lack of precision in her words is key.

That night, Tarpeia snuck out and opened the gate, allowing an entire army of waiting Sabine men into the Capitol. Then, she demanded her reward, avidly eyeing their delicious jewellery, imagining herself wearing a hundred identical bracelets, swept away by the female greed that Roman historians believed to be the root of all evil. Tatius's response was swift and disappointing. His lovely bracelet stayed where it was, but the *other* item he wore on his left arm – his huge wooden shield – came flying through the air. The heavy shield, designed to survive the blow of a sword, crashed into the young girl, knocking her to the floor. Tatius ordered his men to follow his example and give Tarpeia her reward. Shields flew at her from all sides. One after another, soldiers piled their armour on top until they crushed Tarpeia to death under the weight. A traitor killed by those she sold the city to, hoisted by her own stupid, imprecise petard. That she is crushed to death by Sabine shields, thrown at her as her reward, is the third element of Tarpeia's story which remains immutable.

Roman writers thought about Tarpeia a lot, in many different genres, throughout the Roman centuries. She survives in histories, biographies, poetry and moral handbooks and this is surely just a sliver of her actual impact in the Roman world. She appears so often because Tarpeia is secretly the hero of Rome's first war. Think about it. Without Tarpeia, what's happened is that the Romans annoyed the Sabines by committing a terrible crime and the Sabines took revenge by breaching the city and occupying the most sacred, most heavily fortified part. Without Tarpeia, it looks like the Romans just picked a fight and lost, and Romans *hated* losing fights. Tarpeia exonerates the Roman men. It's not their fault that the city was breached, that the Capitol was violated and that the enemy filled the sacred city. It was a girl's fault, a greedy girl corrupted by luxury. What a moral lesson.

Thus, it was a girl's fault that the Romans now had to fight a pitched battle in the middle of their own city and that Rome came close to being lost forever so early in its life. But it was also because of a girl that Rome was saved. In the valleys between Rome's hills, in sticking mud and rain, the Sabine and the Roman men fought for days. At one point, a man named Marcus Curtius got himself so stuck in the churning, awful ooze that he was forced to abandon his despairing horse to save himself. In memory of this horse, the area was called the Lake of Curtius forever and ever, even long after it was paved over.[21] Eventually, after long, hard days of war in the city, the Romans and the Sabines faced one another for one final time. The third-act final battle.

The Sabines, being the fathers and brothers and uncles of the stolen women, drew up their line at the foot of the Palatine Hill, precisely where the Church of Santa Maria in Campitelli now stands, while the Romans, who were now the husbands and lovers of the Sabine women, arranged themselves at the foot of the Capitoline, where the original Temple of Vesta was later built. They checked their horses, polished their swords, lined up their battalions, prepared to kill and to die. As they drew in their breath to start the battle, they were interrupted by what Plutarch somewhat unimaginatively calls 'a spectacle beyond all description'.[22] Running down the hills, charging onto the battlefield from all directions, came streams of crying Sabine women with their long hair let down loose in mourning. Many were pregnant and some carried babies in their arms, products of their Roman marriages. They took their babies to their Sabine relatives, or to their Roman husbands, they fell to the floor in supplication, and in the centre of the battlefield stood Hersilia, Romulus's wife.

Addressing both the armies, Hersilia spoke the first words allowed to a Roman woman. She raised her voice and demanded of men '[w]hat terrible injury have we

done to you that we have had to suffer and must continue to suffer such cruelty?'[23] First, she thundered, the Romans had used violence to kidnap her and her kinswomen and to force them into marriages which have now borne children. Then, their fathers and brothers and uncles ran off when confronted with a sword and didn't come back to save them for so long that many of the hundreds of women abandoned in Rome had been able to conceive and give birth to Roman children. The Sabine women had been left in Rome by Titus Tatius and most of his army for the better part of a year. And now, just as the women had settled into Rome and made peace with their new situation and their new identities as Roman wives and mothers of Roman children, their families had suddenly shown up and started murdering their husbands and the fathers of their children. Her voice carrying across the valley, Hersilia demanded that the soldiers of both sides kill her and her fellow women instead of each other because 'it will be better for us to perish than to live, lacking either of you, as either widows or as orphans.'[24]

Hersilia stunned both sides. The fact that the men would hurt their women regardless of who won the war seems not to have occurred to them before this moment. The Sabines suddenly realised that, in the act of marrying the Sabine women and impregnating them, the Romans had forcibly made themselves their relatives. They had transformed this war into a family feud. Romans had shot the grandfathers of their sons, and their own brothers-in-law, while the Sabines had sliced the throats of their sons-in-law. They had all committed horrific, polluting acts of parricide. Through marriage and the bearing of children, the Sabine women had turned two separate peoples into one. Exactly what Romulus had wanted all along. Hersilia forced the men to confront this reality, to lay down their swords and, on the Roman side at least, their shields, by demonstrating that marriage made them family.

The truce as described by Roman sources is, it has to be said, clearly ludicrous. In Roman renditions, Titus Tatius decided that not only would he call off the war and come to peace, but he would also merge the Sabine peoples with the Romans, moving hundreds of his own people into the city of Rome, which would keep its name and not change in any way. Tatius also agreed to become joint king with Romulus. I have to admit that I would love to see a Sabine version of the whole affair. In the Roman version, the Sabines had no negotiating power because the Romans had possession of the women. He who has the ladies has the power, as the axiom I just made up goes. To celebrate this wonderful treaty, where Tatius just rolled over and gave up all sovereignty and most of his power to move to a city he had thought a villainous scum-yard a week earlier, Romulus decided to name the thirty *curiae* (legislative wards) after thirty of the Sabine women. Sadly, nobody records how those thirty were chosen; perhaps a talent show. Only about seven of the original *curiae* names are preserved so we don't know whether Hersilia was one of the honoured women, but Tarpeia was remembered in the name of the Tarpeian Rock, a lost cliff in Rome from which particularly egregious traitors were thrown.[25] She was also, as I said, buried within the city walls and every year, for hundreds of years, priests held rites at her grave on the Capitol.[26]

Tarpeia thus achieved a kind of immortality and eventually Hersilia joined her. During the reign of Augustus (of course) the poet Ovid, previously known for his sex poems, took a break from writing about how to pick up girls at parties and instead wrote some Roman mythology to ingratiate himself with the new emperor. The *Metamorphoses* is a kind of epic history of the world and Rome up until Ovid's own time (can you tell that there was very much a theme to Augustan-era literature?) and thus obviously includes Romulus and Hersilia. Ovid's version of

Romulus's life ends with the king being assumed into heaven without dying, and transforming into the god Quirinus.[27] The association between Romulus and Quirinus appears in a lot of sources, but Ovid added an innovation. Twenty lines of Ovid's poem describe Hersilia left distraught by her husband's deification, heartbroken, alone on the mortal plane and facing a lonely afterlife without him. The great goddess Juno, wife of Jupiter, was so moved by her grief and so impressed by her goodness as a wife that she decided to allow Hersilia to join Romulus. A messenger goddess, Iris, took Hersilia to the Capitoline Hill where a star fell from the sky, hit Hersilia and transported her to the heavens where she was transformed into the goddess Hora Quirini.[28] Ovid's aim here was to associate Hersilia with Augustus's wife Livia because he was really trying to get into Augustus's good books (he failed) so he made Hersilia a model of a divinely good wife.

In these stories they told about the first Roman women, the Romans recognised that women were foundational. That without Tarpeia and Hersilia, there was no city of Rome, and there was no Roman Empire. In Roman foundation myths, both Tarpeia and Hersilia are needed to engineer the situation where the Sabine women, the Romans and the Sabine men are all together in a tight domestic space and the war can be resolved. Both women are needed for the city to become rooted and to flourish. The traditional version of the foundation of Rome, so often told in modern media, is one which eliminates Hersilia, and often Tarpeia too. It is a story of murder and war and kings, where women exist in the background as a homogeneous blob of (often pointlessly naked) 'Sabine women'.

But the Romans didn't tell that story. They told a story that had women at the core; every version of it prioritised women as the founders of the city and the glue that held it together. Tarpeia is constantly discussed, interpreted and reinterpreted as hero and villain because Romans were highly aware that without her there could be no truce, because without her there could be no intervention of Hersilia; without her Rome remains a pariah in Italy. Hersilia, meanwhile, is understood to be Romulus's wife because she does what Roman wives do best: she persuades her husband to do a sensible and merciful thing.[29] Married women – wives – are the particular heroes of the story of the foundation of Rome because they function as the common interest and the tie between men. Wives transform men from strangers to brothers and sons. When wives become mothers, they draw men even closer together, changing them from two separate tribes into one big begrudging family celebrating tense Saturnalias together. Without wives, men fight and kill and die with nothing. Wives allow men to have a future, a legacy, a family.

Tanaquil

616 BCE

The Queen

Hersilia may have been the wife of the first king, but Rome did not have a true queen until Tanaquil arrived. In the ninety-nine years and four kings between Romulus's death and Tanaquil's husband's ascension, there had been no named women in the palace (if we exclude the second king Numa's alleged 'nightly consultations' with a nymph).[1] Tanaquil arrived to change all that and to usher in a brave new period of Roman monarchy: the chaotic incest and murder period.

Like Hersilia, Tanaquil did not begin life as a Roman woman. She was an Etruscan woman, born and raised in the Etruscan city of Tarquinii in Lazio. A member of an honourable and aristocratic family, she inexplicably married a nouveau-riche foreigner called Lucumo. Lucumo's father came from Corinth, Greece, and moved to Tarquinii after being hounded out of his home city by political violence and the rise of a tyrant. In Tarquinii, he married a local girl and had two sons. He outlived one son so, when he died, his other son Lucumo inherited his entire estate. The huge patrimony made Lucumo rich enough to marry an aristocratic woman, but nothing could make up for that fact that his father had been Greek.[2] In Tarquinii, an ancient and esteemed city, he would always be a little degraded, a little looked down on, because of his father's heritage. Only people born and raised in the city for generations could ever be real aristocracy in Tarquinii.

Had Tanaquil and Lucumo merely wanted comfortable lives in familiar surroundings, this status situation may not have been a problem. The couple could have enjoyed luxurious lives of leisure in a big Etruscan city. That life, however, was not what either of them wanted, especially not Tanaquil. Livy describes Tanaquil as 'a woman of most exalted birth, and not of a character to lightly endure a humbler rank', suggesting to me a woman who was perhaps not *entirely* thrilled with the husband she ended up with.[3] Thankfully for her, Rome offered another path. Rome was still a new city in Italian terms; just about 115 years had passed since Romulus had built his first little wall, and it still appeared a swirling meritocracy where anyone could show up and make a name for themselves. Roman citizenship remained open to people from all over the Mediterranean and so people with ambition, who wanted status unavailable to them in more settled city states, showed up to become Roman.

Suffocating in the rigid social hierarchy of Tarquinii, where Tanaquil would always be debased by her husband's blood, where her children would never be able to ascend to the highest ranks, and where she would always be a little humiliated by her station, the wild newness of Rome seemed full of possibilities. There was room for men and women who wanted more in Rome and so, in Livy's telling, Tanaquil persuaded her husband that they should leave their home city, their friends and family, and try to make it in the bright lights of Rome. And so, the two of them struck out on the sixty-mile trip south to their new home.[4]

I like this story a lot because it feels so timeless. The small-own/old-world kids striking out to make it in the big city/new world, a bright, fresh land of opportunity just over the horizon, a young couple tied together by their yearning for more. You can practically feel the Broadway overture swelling as they climb into their little carriage and make their way to new lives. Indeed, were this a piece of musical theatre, the intermission would come just after Tanaquil and Lucumo received a message from the gods, communicating to them their destiny. As they were travelling along the lonely road to Rome, just as they reached Janiculum (now part of Rome) an eagle swooped down and gently lifted the *pilleum* from Lucumo's head. A *pilleum* is a brimless, slightly pointy felt cap associated with freedom and conveying an air of mild ridiculousness to the modern viewer, not unlike a Smurf hat, so please include this in your imagined version of this musical. The eagle flew a little circle above the cart and then, just as gently, dropped the hat back from whence it came before speeding noisily away, screaming at the skies. What made this feat particularly impressive was that Lucumo and Tanaquil were travelling in a covered wagon.

To you and me, and perhaps even Lucumo, this was a cracking anecdote to tell over dinner. 'The time an eagle stole my hat and gave it back' is basically a much better version of my story of the time a Brighton seagull deliberately tripped me so it could steal my pizza slice. Invite me round to dinner for the full version of that scintillating tale. Tanaquil, however, saw a clear omen. A marvel with a message from heaven. Because Tanaquil was an Etruscan woman and Etruscan women were believed to be uniquely skilled in reading divine messages; she explained to Lucumo what had happened with rising excitement: the eagle had come from a specific quarter of the sky and thus brought a message from some specific (unnamed) god; the eagle had touched the highest part of Lucumo's head and had removed a head accessory, so clearly the message related to ruling. He had then replaced the hat. Basically, she said, he had thus been crowned by heaven. She read the incident as a prophecy of their assured success in their mission. They would rule in Rome. And so buoyed, they continued through the city gates. You see what I mean about this being a perfect place to put an interval.

This isn't a play, though, so you just get a paragraph break. Sorry. The couple arrived in Rome just a year into the reign of the city's fourth king, Ancus Marcius, grandson of the second king Numa, and the first king to have used his hereditary claim to convince people to vote for him. Romans chose their kings by a slightly complicated process whereby the Senate nominated a couple of candidates, the people voted for (or against) said candidate and then the Senate ratified the vote to make the decision final. During this process, a Senator took the temporary role of the *interrex* who oversaw proceedings and crowned the new king. The aim was to ensure that they allowed only the best and most qualified men to rule once they had proven their ability, rather than some over-privileged idiot prince with no skills. Ancus, with his royal blood, rang the first tinkling warning bell that this process might not be infallible.

Not that this bothered Lucumo and Tanaquil, who set about charming the pants off Roman high society. Lucumo immediately changed his name to fit in better, calling himself Lucius Tarquinius Priscus.† Bye bye foreigner Lucumo, hello Roman aristocrat Tarquinius. The pair used a combination of generosity, hospitality, kindness and good advice to win the affection of basically everyone in town, including the king himself.[5] Within a few years, Tarquinius had worked his way into the king's inner circle and, just eight years after arriving in Rome, was sent to lead the cavalry in a war with the Latins in 631 BCE. By the time Ancus died,

peacefully in his sleep, in 616 BCE, Tarquinius had been made guardian of Ancus's underage sons. That's how good he was at making friends, and that's how open Rome was to strangers. Any old (wealthy) person with any past could show up, invite some well-placed people to dinner, give some thoughtful gifts, and find themselves at the very centre of the Roman royal court, as Roman as can be. They could become so trusted, so Roman, that when a vacancy appeared on the Roman throne, they received a nomination from the Senate to be the next king of Rome. Which is what happened to Tarquinius.

Having been nominated, Tarquinius and Tanaquil decided to do a tiny bit of subterfuge to absolutely ensure their success in the election. Although Romulus and Numa had done their best to make a hereditary system unlikely, the Roman attachment to nepotism and family tended to override everything else. Ancus's two sons had also been nominated for the throne and their royal heritage gave them a slight edge over the newcomers, despite their young age. If they could be kept away from the election meeting, however, they could not be elected. So Tarquinius and Tanaquil tricked Ancus's young sons into going on a hunting trip in the countryside rather than going to a boring grown-up meeting. The boys blithely went off, giving Tarquinius the chance to give a rousing speech and have himself elected king before anyone knew what was happening. Thus, the Etruscans introduced both canvassing and subterfuge into a pure Roman system. Tiny cracks. Next, Tarquinius doubled the size of the Senate, enrolling a hundred new Senators who, he made sure, were entirely loyal to him above the state. For the first time, factions emerged in the Senate.

Despite the dodgy circumstances of their ascension, Tarquinius and Tanaquil ruled happily for several years. Tarquinius did what Romans did best and spent most of his time waging wars against his neighbours, including a town called Corniculum. In the sacking of this town, the Romans enslaved many people and took them back to Rome, including a woman named Ocrisia who may or may not have been the wife of the king of Corniculum and may or may not have been pregnant. In Livy's telling, Ocrisia was already pregnant when she was captured, recognised as a royal woman and taken to live alongside Tanaquil as a companion in recognition of her status.[6] In this version, Ocrisia gave birth to her son, Servius Tullius, as a free woman but nevertheless a royal hostage in the Roman palace.

There is, however, another much more fun version told by every other source from Dionysius to Pliny the Elder to Ovid. In that version, Ocrisia was a non-royal and not-pregnant woman, enslaved by Tarquinius and given to Tanaquil as an *ancilla* – an enslaved handmaid. One day, after years of service, Ocrisia was doing something with the semi-sacred fire in the royal house in the presence of Tanaquil, whereupon, to everyone's great surprise, a giant willy rose up out of the ashes. The Roman authors all become hilariously coy when describing this, even though they all have dicks decorating half their houses. Ovid blushingly refers to it as an 'obscene masculine form', which is very funny for a man who wrote a poem about how girls should be porn-star loud in bed, while Pliny opts for 'a male genital organ' lest anyone read the word 'penis' and faint.[7] This floating ash willy proceeded to impregnate poor Ocrisia, because Tanaquil, who was able once again to recognise this as a come on from the gods, ordered her to sit down on the fire and fuck it, and Ocrisia obeyed.

In doing so, Tanaquil acted as the interpreter of the gods, understanding that they wanted to give the Romans a hero, 'a scion superior to the race of mortals', and that Ocrisia was the chosen vessel.[8] Like the Virgin Mary, but ruder. Quite whose dick it was floating in the ashes is up for debate; Ovid is pretty clear that it

belonged to Vulcan (the Roman version of Hephaestus, not the pointy-ear dudes), while Pliny thought that the family's Lar, a kind of home-based guardian deity, was the father. On the other hand, one nineteenth-century English translator of Pliny invented a cute theory that Tarquinius had impregnated Ocrisia and then lied about it 'to escape the wrath of queen Tanaquil'. Here we see modern(ish) commenters converting Tanaquil from a wise mediator between the divine and mortal spheres, into a cuckqueaned hag who scares her cheating husband, who also hates her.[9] That's misogyny at work for you, pals.

Anyway. All this gods and fire penis stuff was developed to explain why Tanaquil and Tarquinius had such a special fondness for Ocrisia's son, Servius Tullius, despite having two children of their own (a son and a daughter). The gods ordained that Servius be the favourite. Servius wasn't an enslaved kid forever tainted by his enslavement, as Livy thought, but sent from heaven to rule the Romans. It was because she understood that that Tanaquil took Servius (who is more often called Tullius in the sources, but we already have a lot of names beginning with T here and there's more coming, so I'm trying to make it easier for everyone) under her wing, educated him as she would her own son and trained him to be a leading Roman man. Over time, Servius impressed Tarquinius and Tanaquil, who remained convinced that he had been chosen by the gods, so they married him to their daughter, making Servius their son-in-law. The daughter's name was, naturally, Tarquinia. I warned you.

At some point when Servius was almost grown, a third miracle occurred, again witnessed and interpreted by Tanaquil. This time, as the boy was sleeping, his head caught on fire. Reasonably, everyone around him went into a flap and tried to save him by putting the flames out. Tanaquil stepped in, recognised it as a divine fire and told everyone to calm down and not interfere. Eventually, Servius woke up of his own accord, and as he blinked open his eyes – possibly somewhat perturbed to find his entire family staring at him while he took a little siesta – the flames died down, leaving him completely unharmed. Tanaquil interpreted this for the onlookers, saying in Livy's account that Servius would be 'a lamp to our dubious futures and a protector of the royal house on its day of distress'.[10]

Despite these ominous omens, Tarquinius's reign continued for thirty-eight successful years. The sources recording histories do not pay much attention to Tanaquil or the home front. They are much more interested in wars, battles, treaties and the occasional royal action. You would never guess from reading Livy or Dionysius that Tanaquil was remembered at all in Rome except in these odd moments. Thankfully, other genres of writing exist and these hint at the impact Tanaquil had on creating the model of an idealised Roman wife. We are told by Pliny, quoting the lost titan of Roman literature Varro, that Romans so revered Tanaquil as an ideal wife that objects believed to have been owned or made by her were preserved in two separate temples and could still be seen in the first century CE.[11] In the Temple of the ancient god Semo Sanctus Dius Fidius on the Quirinal Hill stood a bronze statue of Queen Tanaquil along with her personal distaff and spindle. In the Temple of Fortune, also on the Quirinal, was displayed a toga – an 'undulating royal toga' no less (I assume that means pleated) – woven by Tanaquil for Servius and worn by him. She was considered to be the inventor of the 'undulating royal toga' and also of the straight, plain tunic ritually worn both by brides on the night before their wedding and by newly enlisted soldiers.

So Tanaquil wasn't just a spinner and weaver, she was a trail-blazing fashion designer. In addition, Romans believed and repeated that it was because of, and to honour, Tanaquil that brides carried a specially decorated distaff and spindle at their

weddings, and to honour her that brides (allegedly) intoned 'Where you are Gaius, there am I Gaia' in their wedding ceremony, referring to her alternate name Gaia Caecilia.[12] Tanaquil, an Etruscan queen, was woven into the very fabric of Roman life and that speaks to a queenly role that was visible and significant in Roman culture. And again, here we see more origin stories for marital rituals, and the importance of marriage in Roman self-mythologisation.

So far in her life, Tanaquil has persuaded her husband to move to Rome, interpreted at least three vital omens and invented at a minimum two types of clothing. But her greatest moment didn't come until she was about seventy-five years old (according to the reasonable calculations of Dionysius of Halicarnassus) in 578 BCE.[13] Almost four decades had passed since Tarquinius had played his little trick on the sons of Ancus Marcius to ensure his ascension to the throne, and those sons had grown into very bitter men. They felt that the throne should be their patrimony, their inheritance, and they had harboured this grudge for a freakishly long time. Therapy didn't exist in the sixth century BCE, which is a shame because it could have averted some of the drama the Marcius brothers were about to start.

As Tarquinius and Tanaquil made it clear that they were attempting to set up Servius as the first son-in-law to inherit the Roman throne, it dawned on the Marcius brothers that they had absolutely no chance of taking the throne back into their family via the electoral process. Tarquinius transparently wanted his faction in the Senate to ease Servius's ascension to the throne and be the first king to choose his own successor. This triggered a rage in the Marcius brothers, taking on a xenophobic flavour when they started going round complaining that Tarquinius wasn't even a real Roman. He was a *Greek* (spit), and so they concocted a mildly ludicrous plot to have Tarquinius killed.

The plot involved the brothers persuading two friends, who might have been shepherds, or shepherds who might have been their friends, to go to Tarquinius's palace and start a fake fight with their 'rustic tools'.[14] The plan was that the shepherds would make such a racket that Tarquinius himself would emerge to try to arbitrate the situation, and that is exactly what happened. The pair of shepherds screamed at each other and at the palace guards until the aged king hobbled out, followed by his wife, to deal with the matter, at which point one of the shepherds launched his 'rustic tool' – turned out it was an axe – at the king and then fled, leaving the weapon embedded in the royal skull.

The place exploded in uproar as everyone started freaking out about the literal axe murder of the fricking king. Everyone, that is, except Tanaquil. Tanaquil took charge. She ordered guards to deal with Tarquinius and kicked everyone else out of the palace. She closed and locked the doors, then summoned Servius. When Servius turned up, Tanaquil broke the news that the king was dead but insisted that no one else know about it. There was too much danger, to her mind, that the Marcius brothers might be able to talk their way onto the throne when she *knew* that the gods had bequeathed it to Servius. She *knew* from the omens and the divine messages. This was their day of distress; he was their lantern.

So, she gave Servius a pep talk and told him to pull himself together and be ready to act. She then, in an extraordinary moment, opened a palace window and addressed the panicking, pushing mosh pit of a crowd that had gathered outside to fret about their king. She leaned out, like Brian's mother in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, and told them firmly that the king wasn't dead, that he had merely been knocked out and needed a rest. In the meantime, she told them, they 'should obey Servius Tullius, who would dispense justice and perform the duties of a king'. She basically declared herself to be the *interrex* and then placed the crown upon

Servius's head. And the Senate and people of Rome obeyed.[15] Tanaquil was a king-maker.

Tanaquil and Servius hid the death of Tarquinius for several days while they went around campaigning to ensure that there would be no problems with Servius ascending to the throne. This included taking on formal guardianship of Tanaquil's grandsons by her son, Lucius and Arruns, and then marrying them to Servius's daughters – Tanaquil's granddaughters by her daughter, both called Tullia. In Livy's version of this story, Lucius and Arruns are Tanaquil's sons, but Dionysius of Halicarnassus demonstrates pretty convincingly that they have to be her grandsons.† The plan moved smoothly, and Servius managed to work his way into being king without too many arguments from anyone. It's not entirely clear how Tarquinius's death was actually announced, or whether Servius ever went through the formal process of being elected king. In Livy's telling, he managed to distract from the issue of whether he was legally king or not by starting a war, which Livy snarkily describes as 'most opportune for the tranquil preservation of the existing state of things'.[16]

Thus, Tanaquil used omens and subterfuge to crown another king, and this one turned out to be even more significant for Rome's future. Servius revealed himself to be a bit of an innovator who had some ideas about how to fix up the Roman army. He instituted Rome's first census, primarily aiming to find out how much money everyone had. Allegedly, he recorded 84,700 people living in Rome at the time, making Rome in the sixth century BCE about the same size as St Albans in 2021. Based on how much cash every man owned, Servius divided the population into centuries. Centuries were both military and political units. The military part is irrelevant here, but in politics they acted as voting blocks: each century had one vote. All men who owned 100,000 *asses* or more were divided into eighty centuries, those with 80–100,000 *asses* were divided into twenty centuries, those with 75–80,000 *asses* made up another twenty centuries and so on until everyone who owned less than 25,000 *asses* (most people) were lumped into one single century.† Each century level had certain burdens in terms of military service and tax paying, with those at the bottom having no obligations. This system, quite fairly, put the burden of taxation on the rich and was surprisingly progressive. It was obviously never going to fly with the rich guys, and the solution was to give the rich lads at the top way more centuries than everyone else.[17] As repayment, effectively, for paying more tax, Servius gave the richest more votes in elections and assemblies. From now on, votes would be taken by century, not per person, and the richest had four times as many centuries as the poor. The poorest mass now had one vote to share between them. I know you are wondering why I am telling you this tedious stuff but remember it. This is the beginning of some problems that came to characterise Rome for approximately five centuries and we will return to it later.

Before all that, though, we have to say goodbye to Tanaquil, who dies off screen. We have no idea how or when, just that she cannot still be alive at a certain point because she would be well over a hundred years old. Some historians, notably Fabius (most of whose works are lost), have her still knocking about at the end of Servius's forty-year reign but those people, to paraphrase Dionysius, are bad historians.[18] That's not the most satisfying ending to a chapter, I know. It feels like someone as important and as interesting as Tanaquil should at least get a mention when she dies, if not a grand death scene, but Roman historians possessed a disappointing lack of dedication to narrative satisfaction.

Tanaquil is largely forgotten these days, even among historians of Rome. If there is a popular history of Rome mentioning her, I have yet to find it. Only Mike Duncan's 179-episode epic history of Rome hints at her existence. She has been about as erased from history as it is possible to be.[19] But this erasure is a modern phenomenon; to Romans, Tanaquil was important. In their myths and legends about how Roman wives should be and act, Tanaquil left a serious mark on the social and cultural history of Rome, in its ritual clothing, its rites of passage and its geography. A gate in the city walls colloquially called The Window was said to be named in reference to the window where Tanaquil, 'a discreet and royal woman', addressed the Romans following Tarquinius Priscus's death.[20] She is a model of an elite Roman wife who shapes the lives of her husband and children, who firmly advises and guides when necessary. And who invents a banging toga. But now, to the incest and murder.

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† There are tiny hints buried in some sources that Tanaquil started to go by the name Gaia Caecilia but this also might just be Romans being confused. In the sources which relate her whole story, she is always called Tanaquil, so that's what I will be calling her.

† His argument is basically that, if Tanaquil is seventy-five in 568 BCE, which is a reasonable guess based on when she arrived in Rome as a married woman, then the very latest she could have had kids is at about fifty, which would mean her hypothetical sons were in their thirties or forties when their father died and they would therefore not require an adult guardian and would probably already be married. It is perfectly plausible to Dionysius, and me, on the other hand, that Tanaquil could have young grandsons, perhaps because their father had died. Furthermore, Dionysius adds, no mother of honour or dignity, which Tanaquil certainly was, would ever be so awful as to bestow an inheritance which belongs to her son on some random kid. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.6.

† An *as* is a tiny bronze coin which acted as the equivalent to a sterling pound in the Early Republican economy when bronze was the most valuable metal available in quantity.

Lucretia and Tullia

510 BCE

The Virgin and the Whore

If there is one name you have heard before in this book, it is likely to be Lucretia's; she exists at the opposite end of the notoriety scale to Tanaquil. Even if you have never read Livy or Ovid, you might have seen the paintings by Titian, Rembrandt, Raphael or Botticelli. You might have read about her in Dante or Chaucer, Machiavelli or Shakespeare. Over the millennia, Lucretia has come to be a symbol of innocence violated and strength of will; her naked body has been displayed in writing and in painting so often it is hard to keep track and I am afraid we are about to examine her again.

Lucretia's story repeats about a hundred times in the surviving Roman literature but there are only really two versions of her legend: the version told by Livy and Ovid during the reign of Augustus, and the version told by everyone else. For some reason, the Augustan version has become the 'canonical' version, probably because it is cooler and also because Augustus reshaped the world in his own image, so that's the story I shall tell you.

We begin in 510 BCE. Servius's reign lasted forty-four years before he was replaced, in events we will get to later, by Lucius Tarquinius. In 510 BCE, Lucius, Rome's seventh king, had been ruling for twenty-five years and he was a classic Roman tyrant. He stopped taking the advice of the Senate and acted entirely on his own will, he executed people without a trial and for his own profit, he made friends with Rome's enemies and humiliated Rome's friends. There was a whole deal where he arranged a meeting with all of Rome's allies, who trekked out with their retinues to talk to him, and then he didn't bother to turn up. Even his wars, usually a real crowd pleaser in Rome, were considered to be 'unexpectedly tedious'.[1] Worst of all, when Lucius Tarquinius engaged in public building projects, like the Great Sewer, he forced free people to work instead of using enslaved labour. Romans found this to be wildly offensive: what was the point of enslaving people if they didn't do all the work?[2] For all these offences against Roman morality and kingship, the Senate renamed him Tarquinius Superbus: Tarquin the Arrogant. Their resistance largely ended there, though, until Lucretia got involved.

Lucretia was a highly aristocratic woman, the daughter of Spurius Lucretius and the wife of Tarquinius Collatinus. As his name suggests, Collatinus was Tarquinius Superbus's relative; the king's second cousin once removed, which doesn't sound like much but was important to the Romans. Thus, Lucretia sat near the top of the Roman hierarchy. In 510 BCE, she lived in Collatia, a Latin town about five miles outside of Rome, where her husband was governor. At the time of these events, though, her husband was away, engaged in a stagnant siege of a nearby town called Ardea. One evening, while bored out of their skulls in their camp, Collatinus got into a bragging match with his cousins – the king's sons – about who had the best wife. Best, in this context, meant the most chaste, the most hard working and the most self-denying. If you have your head in your hands right now, you are not alone. Because Roman men be Roman men, the bragging turned

into an argument, and then into Collatinus suggesting that the three of them ride to Rome late at night to spy on their wives, find out what the mice really did while the cats were away, and prove once and for all who was the most devoted and virtuous.

The men set out on the twenty-mile journey back to Rome. This is a four-hour journey on a trotting horse, six on a walking one, so that is quite some commitment to the bet. Arriving in Rome at dusk, the wee creeps snuck up to the palace and spied both the king's sons' wives having a lovely dinner party with their friends and some wine. This sounds fine, but Romans drew a direct line between drinking wine and adultery in women, so the implication in this dinner party is that the royal wives were sluts. With this disappointing data point in hand, they then trotted a further five miles north to Collatia where they peeped into the window to find Lucretia sitting in her atrium surrounded by enslaved women, each quietly working on spinning wool in the flickering lamplight. Wool working exists at the other end of the symbolic femininity spectrum to wine drinking; it represents chastity, devotion and self-sacrifice. Largely, I suspect, because spinning and weaving wool is a hugely time-consuming, labour-intensive, exhausting, repetitive, tedious and often disgusting activity that most people would only do under duress. Seriously, raw wool is so greasy. A rich woman who was willing to get involved with it as a hobby was rare indeed. Collatinus had won the Lovely Wife Competition hands down.

Ovid, being a poet rather than a historian, let his romantic flag fly a little when he described this scene. In Livy's version, Lucretia is merely up late at night spinning wool because she is uncomplicatedly virtuous. In Ovid's take, Lucretia is specifically spinning wool in order to make a cloak for her husband because she misses him so much. She is also crying because she worries about his safety while away at war:

> 'I faint, I die, as often as the image of my warrior Comes to mind and chills my heart with cold.' She ended in tears, letting fall the stretched yarn, And buried her face in her lap.[3]

Ovid found this weeping, greasy girl to be extremely hot, and so did Collatinus's cousin Sextus who went full heart-eyes at her 'white skin and yellow hair' as well as her modesty and apparently incorruptible virtue. Everyone burst in, surprising Lucretia and forcing her to put on food and a guest room for everyone. Her hospitality made her even more attractive to Sextus.

From Lucretia's perspective, she was sat at home in a slightly rubbish town outside her home city, murdering her eyesight and giving herself a repetitive strain injury with a spindle in the dark, when her husband suddenly burst in, dragging the king's heirs behind him. She had to put on a bright smile and organise dinner and ignore her husband's cousin leering at her over his wine. Eventually the men left and returned to their camp in the south, allowing Lucretia to return to her virtuous life for a few days until, out of the blue, Sextus turned up again, alone. Once more, Lucretia went through the motions of good hospitality: she fed him, she gave him a guest room, she made polite conversation and then she retired to her bedroom, perhaps a little confused about why Sextus had yet again made the six-hour journey to her house as she drifted off to sleep. She would soon find out.

In the middle of the night, Lucretia was awoken by an arm pressing down on her chest. As she drew in breath to scream, a voice whispered in her ear, 'Shush Lucretia, I am Sextus Tarquinius. My sword is in my hand and if you scream you will die.' Lucretia froze. It turned out that Sextus, son of the king, had found

Lucretia's wool working and modesty to be so attractive that he had snuck away from Ardea, ridden for hours and turned up at her house to rape her. But he didn't want to take her by force. He wanted to take her virtue.

Lucretia, petrified, was subjected to Sextus alternately declaring his love, threatening her with death and trying to bribe her with promises of making her queen of Rome. Lucretia rejected his threats and his promises. She did not want to be queen, she did not want to be seduced, she was not afraid to die. She sat like a rock. Until Tarquin hit upon the one thing that Lucretia did care about: her honour. He told her that if she did not lie back and take it, he would rape her by force and then kill her. He would then kill one of her male enslaved attendants and tell her husband, her father and everyone she knew that he had caught them having extramarital sex and had – in accordance with the law – executed them for their crime of adultery. All her virtues in life would be washed away as Lucretia would be remembered as a harlot who debased her free, Patrician self with enslaved men while her husband was away.[4]

This threat horrified Lucretia, who finally submitted to Sextus without a fight. She lay back and let him hurt her. Having achieved his aim, destroyed Lucretia's glorious chastity and penetrated her modesty, Sextus simply rode away and left her. One assumes that he thought she would be so overcome with shame and horror and pain that she would simply keep her ordeal a secret. Were she to tell anyone what happened she would expose herself to the twin agonies of being disbelieved and accused of asking for it. As the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus says, writing about Lucretia in the first century BCE, men always prefer slander to praise.[5] Victims are so rarely believed, especially when there are no bruises and the perpetrator is powerful. Talking about the prince assaulting her would open Lucretia up to whispers and abuse. She's lying, she wanted it and changed her mind, she wants his money, she wants to be famous, she's obsessed with him. There was a good chance, then, that to avoid this Lucretia would simply hide her rape and suffer its consequences in silence, allowing Sextus to prance around for the rest of his life and commit untold violence. Sextus, however, failed to reckon with Lucretia's iron will, utter lack of fear and total commitment to protecting her reputation.

The next morning, Lucretia was 'grieving', but determined, and she sent out messages to her husband at Ardea and her father in Rome asking them to come to her immediately and bring a friend.[6] Hours later, Collatinus and Lucretius arrived, with Collatinus bringing another cousin, Lucius Junius Brutus. It's unlikely that Lucretia was thrilled to have this cousin in the room as he had been given the nickname 'Brutus', meaning stupid, as a joke at the expense of his apparent idiocy. Brutus had spent his life presenting himself as dim-witted and slow, allowing himself to be the butt of everyone's jokes and letting his family take advantage of him so that his uncle the king would not see him as a threat to be eliminated. If you've read or seen *I, Claudius*, you probably recognise this strategy as one ascribed to the emperor Claudius, but that is a discussion for another time. Collatinus brought him along because he was the first person he saw after receiving his wife's distressing letter and so he was there for Lucretia's big moment.

Once everyone gathered, Lucretia began to cry and, in Ovid's telling, stumbled over her words as she tried to tell them what had happened. Through her tears, she described what Sextus had done. In the face of their shock, she emphasised two things: first, her body had been violated but her mind and heart were innocent. Her honour had been forcibly taken away, not given. Secondly, she insisted that her family punish Sextus and avenge her rape: 'he brought ruin on men, and on himself

no less – if you are men!'[7] As she cried and explained herself, the men tried to comfort her. They told her that she was not to blame, that she was not ruined and that her honour was still intact because she had not truly consented. Lucretia, however, was having none of it. In Livy's famous words, she declared 'though I acquit myself of moral wrongdoing, I do not absolve myself from punishment; nor in the future shall any unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia.' She then pulled out a dagger hidden in her clothing and drove it directly into her own heart. She punished herself for what had been done to her, believing that 'it was not proper for the victim of such wanton insolence to look upon the sun'.[8] She took her own life so that no person would ever be able to say that her violation was not 'rape-rape'[9] and so that women who committed adultery in the future would not be able to make a false rape claim in order to get out of being punished for their 'crime'. Lucretia was prepared to sacrifice herself to be an obstacle to all the world's worst people, and to highlight chastity as a woman's crowning glory.[10]

An alternative interpretation of her suicide, offered by Valerius Maximus in the book of lessons and anecdotes he wrote for the emperor Tiberius, is that Lucretia simply would not bear the injury that had been done to her and so she took her own life as a way of taking back control of her own body. Valerius, somewhat uncomfortably, describes Lucretia as having a 'manly spirit allotted by Fortune's spiteful error to a woman's body' and praises her extraordinary courage in refusing to live as a dishonoured woman. Sextus, it is universally agreed, did not attack Lucretia out of lust or desire, but because he wanted to destroy her reputation. He wanted her to feel shame instead of pride. He wanted to take an element of her that others admired and spoil it. He did not want to rape her by force because he wanted her to submit and to know she had submitted to his attack and to live with that knowledge weighing on her. He wanted people to whisper behind her back and for her to suffer in shameful silence every day. Lucretia could not and would not bear that and so she did the only thing she could to reassert her own autonomy, to reclaim her lost honour and reassert the purity of her reputation. She washed her reputation clean with her own blood.[11]

And so Lucretia died, from one very effective wound, leaving her husband and father wailing in grief and agony. As they sobbed and held her body, Brutus surprised everyone by suddenly shaking off the aura of stupidity he had been presenting for his entire adult life, pulling the knife from Lucretia's chest and declaring that he would pursue Sextus, the king and his entire family until they had all paid for Lucretia's death. Dumbfounded by this apparent miracle, Collatinus and Lucretius unthinkingly agreed. Vengeance would be theirs.

Now this is why Lucretia's story is so famous and so often repeated and how it ended up being a staple of Renaissance art. Her response to her rape was to expose it and then to make Sextus a murderer. Inspired by her actions and her exhortations for justice, Brutus and Collatinus started a rebellion against the king. They took Lucretia's body to the market square in Collatina (or Rome, depending on who you are reading) and displayed it for everyone to see. They exposed her violation and her death in much the same way that Mark Antony would later display Julius Caesar's bloody robes, making her death a very public problem. It's worth noting at this point that every surviving version of this scene was written *after* Julius Caesar's death so that mirroring is probably deliberate. Lucretia's rape became a symbol for the tyrannical desires of Tarquinius Superbus and the demands he had made on the Roman people. Now, not even the women were safe. Her death became an inspiration. She refused to live without honour and demonstrated the courage to sacrifice herself for what she perceived to be the Greater Good (your

mileage may vary) and in doing so she highlighted the cowardice of the Roman men who were content to live in cringing terror while their rights and the city were violated. Her bravery in taking her own life shamed everyone who failed to stand up for what they believed to be right, and cast even more shame on them because she was merely a woman, while they were men. Lucretia, in dying, gave Brutus and Collatinus and all the other Roman men the guts to take up arms against the king, and succeed.[12] Within days, Tarquinius Superbus and his son had been exiled and Brutus had invented the structure of the Roman Republic with himself and Collatinus as the first consuls.[†]

The rape and suicide of Lucretia were terrible things, expressions of the rot at the core of the Roman monarchy and its monstrous desire to ruin all goodness. But it is not Lucretia herself who is important in the telling of this story. The story is not told from her perspective, but from the POV of Sextus and then Brutus. When Livy and Ovid and Dionysius of Halicarnassus describe Lucretia's assault, they describe it through Sextus's eyes, as he sneaks from his bed and into Lucretia's room. Dionysius even describes him stepping over the enslaved people who slept outside her door.[13] This is because Lucretia's story is not important to Roman male writers because of what happened to her, or even really what she did afterwards. Women being raped and women taking their own lives after rape were not particularly interesting issues *per se*. What was interesting and important was that Lucretia provided a tragic event inspiring a man to do something heroic. Lucretia was Rome's first Woman in a Refrigerator.

The woman in a refrigerator is a storytelling trope that the writer Gail Simone originally identified in comic books. The original woman in a fridge was a character called Alexandra DeWitt, the girlfriend of the Green Lantern. In the 1994 story, Alexandra was attempting to help her boyfriend come to terms with his superpowers and become a superhero while he was refusing to do either. He was only able to overcome his insecurities and immaturity when he came home to find that Alexandra had been brutally murdered by a villain called Major Force and her body rammed into a fridge.[14] With this loss, the Green Lantern was inspired to become a great hero while Alexandra was sacrificed simply to move his story along. This was a particularly egregious example, but it inspired Simone to compile a list of all the women in comic books who had been killed, raped, tortured, sent mad, de-powered, beaten or otherwise violated just so that a man could feel bad about it and become great.[15] Comparison between ancient myth and modern superheroes is not new and you can see where Lucretia fits into this trope.[16] Lucretia, as fridged women do, exists only in relation to the men around her – her husband, mostly – right up until the point where she defies them, ignores their soothing voices, and takes her own life. She could have been a character in her own right, taking back her own story, but then Brutus swooped in and stole it and made it all about him.

Brutus is the hero of Lucretia's story. He is the mastermind who pretended to be an idiot (apparently for decades) so that he could survive a regime that killed off many members of his family. He is the one blessed by the gods and prophesied by the Oracle at Delphi – the greatest oracle in the world – to lead Rome.[†] He is the one who gets statues and public office and to be the superhero. When Cicero describes the overthrow of the kings in a single sentence, Brutus is both the instigator and the subject, while Lucretia is merely the inciting incident relegated to a sub-clause.[17] She is reduced to a Hitchcockian MacGuffin, something vitally important to the motivations of the main character but irrelevant in its own right. The point of Lucretia is not that she is a real woman who really suffers and really

makes an active decision of her own; it is that she is an impetus for Brutus to realise his true destiny as a Roman superhero. He is the Green Lantern, who gets to fight baddies, have character arcs and create a whole Republic from scratch. Lucretia is just a woman who must die so that he can reach his full potential. Lucretia provides the energy he needs to become a legend through the act of vengeance.[18]

But let us not reduce Lucretia completely to just a dead body. She is also an exemplar. Roman moral teaching is built on examples, and Roman history writing was an entirely moral exercise. The whole purpose of writing and remembering history for the Romans was to give contemporary readers moral instructions by showing them examples of good and bad behaviour. Roman historians were not coy about this aim. Within this framework, Lucretia is *the* model of domestic feminine goodness. For hundreds of years, historians, lawyers, politicians, poets and letter writers recalled Lucretia as a shorthand for chastity, a virtue only a woman could possess.

If Lucretia is the very model of a modern modest *femina*, then she needs a foil in the model of a wicked witch. Someone who models what not to do and shows readers the punishments in store for the badly behaved. The position of Lucretia's antithesis was filled by Tarquinius Superbus's wife Tullia, and we need to rewind about twenty-five years to 534 BCE to tell Tullia's story. Tullia was the daughter of king Servius and the granddaughter of Tanaquil. She had a sister, also called Tullia, making writing about them extremely hard. For simplicity here I am going to call Tullia 'Tullia' and her sister just Minor. When Tullia and her sister were young, you may remember, they had been married off to their own first cousins, with Tullia being married to Arruns Tarquinius and Lucius Tarquinius being married to Minor. Servius matched them entirely on the basis of their age and this turned out to be a mistake.

Tullia had a terrible personality: she was arrogant, ambitious, rash and rude. She resented her father and was jealous of her grandmother. But most of all she hated her husband Arruns, a gentle, patient family man. She spent her time berating him for not being king, for not wanting to become king and for being a dweeb. On the other side of the family, sweet, gentle, loving Minor was married to Lucius, whose personality could best be described as 'awful'. Like his sister-in-law, he was selfish, impatient and full of deluded self-belief. He spent his time being frustrated that his wife liked her dad and thus didn't support him in his endeavours to be the next king of Rome at any cost. Everyone in this double date nightmare was unhappy, and horny. In true soap opera style, the two horrible ones, Lucius and Tullia, started an affair and took to sneaking off to snog behind curtains, imagining a life where they had been married to one another. These pillow talks (curtain talks?) gradually escalated until the pair of them were convinced that they should rule Rome immediately and Tullia finally declared that they needed to do something about it.

The speeches attributed to Tullia by the historians are fascinating little insights into how Romans conceptualised the bad ambitious wife and how they showed her to be wicked by giving her a sense of self which was, they thought, entirely misplaced. An ideal Roman woman, as we know from Lucretia, derived her pride, her self-respect and her self-image from her domesticity and her chastity. Her honour as a woman should be focused entirely on her role as a wife within the most private part of the private sphere. When Sextus tried to sweet talk his way into her loincloth by offering her power, money and queenship, Lucretia rejected these worldly things as being far less important than her chastity. Tullia, on the other

hand, saw herself as a public woman. She imagined herself as a queen. And, most terribly, she was willing to throw away her chastity and use sex to fulfil her image of herself. In Dionysius's telling, Tullia rages that her husband 'has nothing of a man in him'. She seethes that he 'makes her humble' although she was born to be great and that he has caused her to 'wither away' despite her youth and beauty by keeping her stuck at home. She feels trapped and dragged down by her husband, who is just a chill guy living his life. She demands a husband who will give her the life and position she believes she deserves.[19] In

Livy's version, Tullia declares that she did not marry 'just to be called a wife' and describes her life as 'servitude' which is a bit much for a woman who literally owns people as slaves but sure. She also, somewhat sulkily, declares that it is very unfair that her grandmother had been a foreign woman who had chosen two of Rome's kings, while Tullia had been born in Rome but hadn't been allowed to do any kingmaking *at all*.[20]

In Roman creation myth, Tullia represents the anti-Lucretia. While Lucretia provides a model for ideal Roman female feelings and behaviour, a woman who focuses her entire being on her role as an honourable wife, right up to the point of killing herself to prevent imaginary future women from benefiting from false rape accusations, Tullia provides a model of the very worst of female behaviour. She does not give one solitary fig about her honour and her chastity is meaningless to her. She is an ambitious nag who cares only about her place in the public sphere of politics and power, and she's also adulterous.

Having seduced Lucius Tarquinius (who was, I'll remind you, both her brother-in-law and her first cousin), Tullia then persuaded him that they should be married. But they were the king's children and divorce was not an option, so they took matters into their own hands. Livy uses some wonderfully delicate language to describe the double murder that Tullia and Lucius committed, saying that they 'made room in their respective houses for a new marriage'.[21] Cutely tiptoeing around the fact that they each poisoned their spouses, making each complicit in the parricide of their own sibling. The Romans considered parricide – the murder of a member of the family – to be the most egregious and polluting of crimes. They recoiled from parricide as you or I might recoil from the idea of murdering a child. The family existed as the core Roman unit; people existed as members of a family, not as individuals, and the main goal of life, for men and women, was to honour and bring acclaim to the family. Killing a sibling or parent, according to Cicero, violated the rules of human nature. By murdering their siblings, Tullia and Lucius defiled themselves.

The pair then compounded their monstrous acts, further disrespecting the family and spitting in the eye of the king, by getting secretly married to one another without either the permission or knowledge of their *paterfamilias* Servius. Finally, as a cherry on top, Tullia bullied Lucius into initiating a coup against her own dad. She ridiculed her new husband, berating him as a coward, a bad Roman, and a twat who was embarrassing her with his very existence until he agreed to hurry along the end of Servius's reign and ensure his own succession with violence.

The coup that Tullia and Lucius led went remarkably smoothly. After some time spent sneakily gathering allies in whispered conversations, promising riches to one man while stoking the grudges of another, Tullia and Lucius built up a large enough following to take on the king openly. They decided not to engage in any kind of clever or complicated plot; instead, Lucius marched into the Curia while the king and Senate were sitting there and simply declared himself king. Lucius furiously denounced Servius – his grandfather – calling him a slave, a despot and an anti-

Roman communist.[22] As if this lack of familial piety and, frankly, rudeness wasn't enough, Lucius ended his rant by physically picking the geriatric king up and hurling him bodily down the steps of the Curia. Seeing this, the Roman Senate did what it almost always did in the face of violence and ran away very, very fast, followed by the king's men, leaving Lucius Tarquinius alone to sit on the throne as the new king of the Romans and to watch his royal grandfather drag his bleeding body across the Forum. And with that, the coup was basically over. Tullia immediately appeared in the Forum and loudly hailed her husband as king in front of a crowd of bemused onlookers, further displaying herself in public in a shameful way.[23] And that's how Tarquin the Arrogant came to sit on the throne as the king of Rome.

Having killed her husband and sister, masterminded a coup, got married without permission and spoken in the Forum, Tullia still hadn't committed her worst act. That came a little later. Servius had been attacked and assaulted, overthrown and instantly abandoned by everyone, a forty-year reign lost in a heartbeat. Alone and injured, he began crawling out of the city. His daughter quickly warned Lucius that her father Servius could not be allowed to live, and Lucius sent guards to resolve the problem of his continued breathing. They found him crawling along the Vicus Cyprius, stabbed him and left his body in the road. Servius, son of Vulcan (or a Lar, or a human man), sixth king of Rome, died like a stray dog and was left lying in the dirt of a busy city street. Tullia had now murdered her father, committing patricide, the most grotesque of Roman crimes. If you thought parricide was bad, patricide leaves it in the dust. Romans took paternal authority so seriously that they would prosecute sons for merely hitting their dads. To demonstrate how appalling they found it, the Romans devised a punishment for patricide called the Sack. In the Sack, the guilty person was sewn into a big bag with a cock, a monkey, a snake and a dog and thrown into the river to drown while fighting off four terrified animals in an enclosed space.[24] The purpose of the animals is unclear, but the aim of the bag was to prevent the dishonoured bones of the patricidal killer from ever polluting the earth again.[25]

At this point, the characterisation of Tullia as the most abominable and depraved woman ever to have lived starts to become almost comical. If you were writing a novel and you created a character who was this lacking in nuance already and had her do this, you'd be called out for being ridiculous. But Romans didn't love nuance. They loved exemplars, so they kept upping the ante. When the Senators returned and things in the Forum became political, Lucius sent Tullia home in her cart, a journey along the Vicus Cyprius to the Clivus Urbius. As her driver reached Servius's body, he stopped in horror. The broken corpse of the king blocked the road and he couldn't move around it. The driver hesitated, causing Tullia to poke her head out of the cart to find out what was happening. When she saw the body, she rolled her eyes. 'Keep going', she demanded. Still the driver hesitated, so she insisted, screaming at the driver to move. And so, she forced him to drive over her father, crushing his corpse beneath her wheels.[26] With this act, she violated her ancestors, she desecrated her father and utterly polluted herself in ways that could never be expunged. Romans revered, protected, cared for and worshipped their familial dead as a religious duty and Tullia's deliberate trampling on these duties ensured that the gods would never be on her side. She ensured that the reign of her husband, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, would end with violence, that her son, Sextus Tarquinius, would be a monster, and she brought an end to the whole Roman monarchy. This all sounds pretty bad, but the glorious Republic cannot rise unless the monarchy falls and the monarchy cannot fall unless two

women bring it down.

Tullia ensured the downfall of the Tarquins long before Lucretia's birth, which is why Brutus swears that he will take vengeance not just on Sextus but on the whole family. When Brutus gives his great speech in the marketplace while displaying Lucretia's body, he reminds his audience that Tullia had defiled herself by driving over her father. What I like about including Tullia as a key part of Lucretia's story is that it makes both Sextus and Brutus's roles less important. Instead of Lucretia being merely a victim of Sextus and an impetus for Brutus's action, the story becomes one about two women bringing down the monarchy, while Brutus is merely the culmination of a curse. Without these two women, one good and one bad, one a great heroine and the other a great villain, nothing happens at all. Lucius Tarquinius never even becomes king. Lucretia lives her happy life as a wife. Without Lucretia and her extraordinary devotion to her honour and the concept of honour, Brutus spends his life pretending to be stupid for no real reason. Once Tullia is included in Lucretia's story, Lucretia stops being a lone woman surrounded by a lot of very emotional men and becomes part of a lineage of women, going back to Tarpeia, who shape Roman history with their actions. When we reframe these stories through the eyes of women, the men lose some of their agency and become tools of fate.

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† The consul was the leading magistrate in the Republic, a sort of president except there were two of them to prevent any one man from gaining too much power. It worked for a while. They were elected and their term lasted a year.

† Livy and Dionysius both relay a story in which Tarquinius Superbus sends his sons and Brutus off to Delphi because a snake appeared in his palace and he needed an explanation. While there, the Oracle prophesied that the first of the three men to kiss his mother would become the leader of Rome. While Sextus and his brother began preparations to race home to Rome and start a tussle over their mother's cheek, Brutus had other thoughts. He faked a fall and, while on the ground, kissed the earth. Thus, Brutus correctly interpreted the prophecy and began his journey to being the first consul. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.56; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.69.

THE REPUBLIC

Oppia

483 BCE

The Vestal

The early Roman Republic is a challenging era for historians, so it is often skipped right over in general books. The story of the expansion of Rome from single city state to winning the Pyrrhic War is a combination of legend and myth. Often the stories are Greek in origin, swirled together with some kind of historical core.[1] Even worse, the stories that Livy and Dionysius and the others recount about the early Republic centre heavily on the wars of conquest in Italy (awful) and the internal class struggle known as the Conflict of the Orders (terrible). The Conflict of the Orders refers to a 300-year-long battle between those centuries that Servius Tullius instituted a couple of chapters ago. Those at the top paid all the taxes and, in return, were given all the political power, while those at the bottom were less heavily taxed and were thus completely excluded from political office. Under monarchy, the political divide mattered less because only Senators and kings engaged in politics, but the Republic introduced elections, magistrates and the potential for non-royal families to gain power and so, by day two of the Roman Republic and its idea of equality, this taxation for votes set-up had become a problem. In addition, the Republic crystallised the divide between Patricians, descended from Romulus's original hundred Senators, and Plebeians (everyone else) and deliberately excluded Plebeians from holding political office. So much for equality. Eventually, these issues led to soldier strikes, battles, riots, executions, innumerable attempts at agrarian reform (a set of words that strikes me cold with horror), exiles, traitors marching on Rome and just a lot of men shouting at one another. Thrilling stuff if you like extremely slow-burn class warfare where all the protagonists are grumpy billionaires, but it's a narrative that is shockingly low in female characters.

I could count the number of women mentioned in the written histories of Rome during the early Republic on a single hand, and most of them get just a line or two to encompass their entire life. The woman, Cloelia, who escaped captivity in the city of Clusium and swam back to Rome with a band of other women gets one line in every history; the mother of Coriolanus singlehandedly talked her horrible son out of attacking Rome with a foreign army and was rewarded by being called a different name in every source. Was she Veturia or Volumnia? Take your pick. There is simply too much war and politics happening during this time for the Roman historians to be worrying about women, with one exception: Vestal Virgins.

First, let us place Vestal Virgins within Roman religion, a subject that is much misunderstood and much maligned in popular culture. It's a common meme to claim that the Romans didn't have their own religion, they just had a knockoff Poundland version of Greek religion. Like all the best jokes, this has a core of truth because big chunks of Roman religion and culture derived directly from the Greeks who colonised Italy and so the Romans technically worshipped the Greek Olympian gods whose stories you see in novels a lot. The myths attached to those gods, however, did not really transfer into a Roman context – they remained Greek

– and Roman religion also included innumerable Etruscan deities and local practices. This means that some people facetiously see Roman religion as simplistic, but it was actually impossibly, indescribably complex. They were a people who conducted rituals to placate and befriend huge numbers of divine beings, rather than people who considered themselves to be members of a religion with doctrines and dogma.[2] With Vestal Virgins we are talking about religion at the state level, the priests and priestesses who were funded by the taxpayer and whose rituals sustained and benefited Rome as a whole during the Republican period. It is impossible to list the many hundreds of gods in the messy Roman pantheon, but it is possible to list the priests of the ones the Romans thought were most important.

The primary priests in Rome were the Senatorial Priests, numbering at least seventy-nine when first instituted and increasing to 136 by the end of the Republic. The Rex and Regina Sacrorum and the Pontifex Maximus were not associated with any specific gods, but were sort of management priests. The main priests were the three major and twelve minor *flamines*, each responsible for the rituals relating to a separate god. The big three *flamines* took responsibility for the gods known as the Archaic Triad: Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus.† If you are into Greek myth, Jupiter is analogous to Zeus, Mars to Ares and Quirinus is his own special Roman god who became synonymous with Romulus. Of the twelve minor *flamines*, we only know the divine associations of ten. So little is known about Roman religious practice in general that two have been totally lost even though thousands of men held these positions over the Roman centuries. History is wild sometimes. That leaves ten gods chosen as the most important by the Romans, and they are not what you will be expecting if you imagine Roman gods to be merely budget Olympians.† They are Carmentis (goddess of oracles and song), Ceres (agriculture and fertility), Flora (flowers, springtime), Palatua (guardian of the Palatine), Pomona (fruit and abundance), Portunus (doors, keys and, unexpectedly, livestock), Vulcan (fire) and Volturnus (the Tiber). The remaining two are Furrina and Falacer whose associations have been lost. Gods orphaned from their roles.[3] The final god to be granted a state-funded priest was Vesta, the Roman equivalent of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, the home, the family, society, security and safety. The Roman Republic insisted that gods as important as Jupiter got two priests, a husband-and-wife duo called the *flamen* and *flaminica Dialis*, while lesser gods like little lost Furrina (perhaps the goddess of cute kittens?) were granted one. Others, such as Juno and Neptune, got none. If we are denoting importance by the number of priests, however, then Vesta towered above them all. Keeping Vesta happy was so vital to the Roman state that they gave her six. Six virginal women.

Vestal Virgins occupied a very strange space in Roman culture, in large part because their office was so incredibly ancient. In the popular imagination, as much as anyone thinks about Vestals at all, they tend to be considered as a uniquely Roman phenomenon and indeed the Roman foundation legend for them insisted that the office of the Vestals had been invented by the second king Numa.[4] However, this foundation legend itself admits that the office of a female priest dedicated to the cult of the goddess Vesta existed in Etruscan cities that predated Rome. For one, Romulus's mother Rhea Silvia served as a Vestal and she *definitely* predated Rome and was definitely a virgin until Mars assaulted her. Vestals certainly existed in other cities across Italy.[5] By the time the Romans founded their own Temple of Vesta and appointed their own priestesses, the cult had already been around for god knows how many centuries and had gathered a whole train of baggage for reasons that no one ever recorded and which only became stranger in a Roman context.

At their core, Vestals were simply priestesses of Vesta. Vesta is one of the Big Twelve Olympian gods (called the *Dii Consentes* by the Romans), as the sister of Jupiter and Juno, but she isn't a god who receives a lot of attention. She appears in very few myths and will never have a bestselling novel re-imagining her as a victimised waif and/or badass feminist written about her. No statues were ever erected of her being all sexy or maternal because she was instead represented by an eternal fire burning in a hearth in a temple in the centre of Rome.[6] The importance of this fire cannot really be overstated. It represented the continued existence of Rome. If the fire went out, Rome would fall, and so the protection and care of the fire was vital. That fire meant everything.

As such, the priestesses were employed to spend twenty-four hours a day, 355 days a year (this being the length of a pre-Julius Caesar year) staring at, feeding and protecting the sacred fire of Vesta. Immediately, this is odd. Women did hold other positions within Roman state religion, but only as part of a husband-and-wife team. Almost all the big priests in Rome had to be married and their wives were required to function as their female counterparts, with specific rituals and rites of their own. In fact, many of the priests were forbidden from divorcing or separating from their wives because the two acted as a unit to fully worship the gods. Only the Vestals were required to be single and virginal. In fact, the virginity of the Vestals was so incredibly vital that they – again, completely uniquely – were dedicated to their role by their parents before they were ten years old for a compulsory thirty-year term of service, during which they were forbidden from marrying or having any sexual or romantic contact of any kind with a man. This thirty-year term was non-negotiable. No Vestal could quit when they got to twenty and wanted a husband and a baby, or simply wanted to wear something other than the old-fashioned ritual dress and hairstyle of a Vestal or found the whole life of ritually purifying things all day every day to be dreary drudgery. There was no quitting. A Vestal Virgin got out only by completing her three decades or dying first.

The virginity stuff fascinated the ancient Roman writers, who were perpetually coming up with new explanations for it. Is it because fire is sterile so the priestesses must be sterile, per Ovid, or because fire is pure and uncorrupted so the priestesses must be pure and uncorrupted, per Plutarch?[7] Cicero, giving a little indication of why he was never the most popular man in Rome, wrote that he believed that Vestals had to be virgins 'so that women may perceive that feminine nature is capable of complete purity', while Livy stated that Numa made them virgins so that they would be made sacred through it.[8] The Romans had no goddamn clue, and neither do modern scholars. Not that ignorance has stopped anyone guessing, because guessing is fun, with modern takes ranging from those implying that the Romans didn't believe their own, very time-consuming, religion, to those confusing the Vestals with Christian virgins.[9] The long and short of it is that the Vestals were simply virgins and their continued virginity was unspeakably critical to the continued success of the Eternal City.

In return for their forced spinsterhood, the state granted Vestals certain privileges in Roman life. They could make a will, for example, and operate outside of the guardianship system constraining every other aristocratic woman in the city. They were inviolable and their bodies considered to be sacred spaces, so even insulting a Vestal was punished with extreme severity. Just ducking to walk underneath a Vestal's litter, rather than waiting for them to pass, resulted in execution. When they walked around town they were accompanied by a lictor, an official provided by the Senate who announced their coming and pushed people out of the way just as they did for magistrates, making them a formal part of the Roman

state, and they could also pardon criminals on their way to execution just by looking at them. At least one Vestal must have abused this power a little, because by the Late Republic, Vestals were made to swear a solemn vow that their meeting the criminal at that precise moment was purely accidental and that they definitely hadn't planned to save any lives.

Lastly, it is impossible for me to leave out the part of the Vestal's job where they looked after some mystery items known as the *sacra*.[10] The Romans understood these to be objects of immense antiquity, probably of divine origin, protected by the Vestals with their bodies and their work. Most people seem to have believed that the main mystery object was the Palladium, a wooden statue of Pallas Athena given to Ilus, the founder of the city of Troy, by Jupiter, which also blinded him because mortals were not supposed to touch it. This is the kind of rubbish gift that ancient gods gave. The ancients had a great many stories about the Palladium but the Roman version was that Aeneas had rescued it from the sack of Troy and carried it with him to Italy, where it naturally ended up in the Roman Temple of Vesta. Now the reason I'm telling you this, even though it is not strictly relevant, is that the sacred objects were kept in a special room, a room only these six lifelong virgins could legally enter, these women who would never experience the touch of a man. The Romans called that room the *penus*.

Now, straight face, back to the important stuff. Roman culture correlated the existence of the Vestal Virgins and the fire of Vesta with the existence of Rome, with the entire idea of Rome. In certain ways, the Vestals – with their protection of the hearth and the *penus* (stop it) – *were* Rome. Their service to the hearth protected the city and the people and maintained the good relationship with the gods known as the *pax deorum*. Roman life, from the very start, revolved around maintaining a tentative friendship with the gods with a mind-boggling, overwhelming number of rituals and sacrifices given on a daily basis by both individuals and the state. The Romans viewed their relationship with the gods as a fragile one, where they were giving their many, many gods gifts, honours and blessings every single day in order to keep them at least relatively happy and the gods, in return, didn't smite them. Romans appear to have viewed their gods as capricious, grasping psychopaths who would crush every mortal in an instant but who could also be bribed into a *quid pro quo* relation-ship with a bit of burnt food and some perfume. Romans gave the gods a little drop of wine, a crumble of every meal, the fat of an occasional four-legged beast, some banging statues and the odd glorious temple and, in return, the gods helped them win wars and didn't send massive swarms of bees to chase them around the streets. When the *quid* got messed up, though, the *quo* stopped coming. And then the Romans started looking around for someone to blame.

Now we come, at last, to Oppia, one of the six Vestals serving her life term in 483 BCE. We don't know anything about Oppia apart from the fact that she was a Vestal who attracted the bad kind of attention. Even her name is a question mark. Livy calls her Oppia, but other sources variously refer to her as Opillia, Opimia and – veering wildly into a new direction – Popilia. That one is from a Christian author, and I can't help but feel he wasn't really trying.[11] We don't know her age, her family background, her experience or how she came to lose her virginity, or how she felt about the whole situation of being a Vestal. She could have been aged anything from eleven to fifty. All we know is that she was living her Vestal-y life, purifying things and looking after the *penus* (I said stop it) in 483 BCE when the Roman world started to go to hell and she got the blame for it.

Oppia's story begins, and this won't shock you, with war. Some peoples already subjugated by the Romans – the Veii and the Volsci – revolted, causing the Romans to have to punch them in the face again. Not usually a problem for the Romans, but Rome itself had also been simultaneously disrupted by another thwarted attempt at agrarian reform in favour of the Plebeians, and so the Plebeians who made up most of the infantry refused to fight. These external and internal tribulations stressed the population, resulting in people seeing omens. Every day someone reported a new 'odd and inexplicable' occurrence says Livy, including 'unusual voices and sights' according to Dionysius.[12] Reports poured in from all over Rome and Roman-controlled Italy, which was not, to be honest, a huge chunk of the peninsula. The largest towns of both the Volsci and the Veii peoples were within twenty-five miles of the Capitol, explaining why the war caused so much stress. War still took place right on Rome's doorstep, and it caused strange things to start happening. Lightning suddenly struck buildings and statues, and stones rained from the skies. Women gave birth to monstrous babies with animal heads, and cows started talking in the fields. People heard strange, disembodied voices and bees swarmed unexpectedly. Everyone knew that such marvels were warnings: something was fucked up and it needed to be fixed immediately. The Senate ordered an investigation and the many priests of Rome, not including the Vestals, called on their Mulder and Scully teams to find out what the problem was. The initial investigation consisted of Etruscan haruspices, who primarily examined entrails, and augers, who examined bird movements. These teams really, really looked at some offal and moving birds in order to come to the conclusion that somewhere a divine rite was being improperly observed. More than that – like which of the innumerable Roman rites had gone wrong – the task force couldn't say. Gods who communicated through livers (no fava beans included) didn't tend to communicate anything more than raw negative emotion. Details were someone else's problem.

And so, the second investigation was deployed. This time, the College of Pontiffs, being the central organisation of elected rather than lifetime priests, took charge. Now they knew the area of the problem, they just had to track down which ritual was being done incorrectly and by whom within their ranks. These ranks consisted of the eight pontiffs, one Rex Sacrorum and his wife the Regina Sacrorum (who were a kind of representative of the overthrown king), our fifteen *flamines*, and the six Vestal Virgins. In charge of all of these, at the head of Roman state religion, stood the elected Pontifex Maximus. Every sacrifice, purification, prayer, offering and ritual enacted by every one of these officials had to be examined for error or impurity of some kind. These errors could be infinite. Had the *flamen dialis* (the primary priest of Jupiter) been on a horse, or touched some yeasted bread? Or maybe he had cut his nails without collecting up the clippings and burying them beneath a tree, or maybe he did but that tree was not a fruitful tree. All these things, among many, many others, might make him impure and infuriate Jupiter, who would then send the bees and talking goats.[13] And that's just one of the seventy-odd priests, each of whom was subject to their own strange and challenging limitations. Eventually – and all the sources emphasise the length of the enquiry – the Pontiffs identified the problem: the Vestal Oppia had lost her virginity. The flame of Vesta had been approached by an impure Vestal and Vesta was *pissed*.

No source says how this information was revealed or what actually happened to Oppia. The implication in the ancient texts, and therefore in the modern interpretations, is always that Oppia was an active and willing participant in her virginity loss, and this is itself assumed to be penetrative sex, although no one ever

says that officially. Both Dionysius and Livy say only that Oppia was convicted of 'unchastity' – *incestum* – simply meaning a loss of purity.† It's *probable* that this means shagging, but not certain. Equally, it's *probable* that Oppia was over the age of sixteen when she was suddenly hauled out of her temple and held up as a whore in front of the whole city, but not certain. She might have been twelve, or eight, or six. Probably not but.

Later trials of Vestals that resulted in acquittal give the best evidence for the kind of behaviour that got Vestals charged with *incestum*. Half a century after Oppia, in 420 BCE, Pontiffs hauled the Vestal Postumia in front of a jury and accused her of *incestum* because her dresses were too pretty and she made too many jokes. Her fun personality and interest in snazzy clothes (I imagine her as a woman who might describe herself as 'bubbly') took her too close to the line of impurity. Although she was found innocent, the Pontiffs sternly informed her that she had to restrain herself and dress 'for sanctity, not carnal knowledge'.[14] Other Vestals we know suffered trials during the Republic found themselves in the dock because the sacred fire went out during their watch (Aemelia in 178 BCE) and as the result of an informant coming forward to accuse them (Tuccia in 230 BCE).[15] Robin Wildfang suggested that Oppia was the first Plebeian Vestal, surrounded by an entirely Patrician college of Pontiffs, making her an ideal scapegoat during a time of agrarian reform.[16] But we don't know what caused Oppia, of the six serving Vestals, to be identified as the offender. We do know, however, that she was found guilty of *incestum* with two separate men.

There are so many ways to read this. Two men were executed for, in Dionysius's words, defiling Oppia. They were scourged in public with rods and then put to death for some kind of sexual contact with Oppia. Whether she consented to this sexual contact is irrelevant both to our ancient sources and to the priests who judged her. I confess that when I read that two men were identified as taking Oppia's virginity, my thoughts did not go to a girl unsuited to a consecrated life having a good time, but to the surprising frequency of raped nuns throughout history. For as long as women have drawn sanctity and power from virginity, men have wanted to take those things from them; just look at Lucretia. But this is pure speculation. And anyway, Oppia's *real* crime was approaching the sacred flame of Vesta, tending to it, and attempting to purify the temple and the sacred objects while in a state of impurity herself. She had been defiled and had then passed that defilement on to the fire and the space representing and ensuring Rome's safety. She had endangered Rome. She had disrespected and dishonoured the goddess. These crimes were unforgivable.

The punishment devised for Vestal Virgins found guilty of *incestum* allegedly came to the king Tarquinius Priscus in a dream. Alternatively it was found in the Sibylline Books, which didn't come to Rome until the reign of the last king, Tarquinius Superbus.[17] The Romans needed the punishment to be divinely inspired in some way, to have a divine origin, because the punishment was uniquely appalling. In most cases, when Roman priests or priestesses messed up a religious rite or prayer or sacrifice, they simply redid the whole ceremony with some apologies. As long as everything was done right eventually, the gods would be chill. When Vestals messed up, however, their mistake could not be expiated with a little ritual washing. The egg was broken and had to be thrown away. So Oppia became the second woman to be condemned to die by being buried alive within the walls of the city.†

Oppia was condemned to what Dionysius calls 'the most shameful and miserable death'. First, she was stripped of her ritual dress and clothed instead in a

funerary outfit, covered with a veil. Then, Oppia climbed onto a funerary bier and lay down, staring up at the sky. To prevent her from making a fuss or trying to escape, the men overseeing the affair then chained Oppia down so that she could not move, gagged her so that she could not cry out, and covered her so that she could not even be seen to cry. With that, burly carriers lifted her bier off the ground and, accompanied by her entire family, her friends and anyone who cared about her, they began to march her with all the formality of a funeral through the streets of Rome.

As they marched, Oppia's aunts and uncles and cousins and parents wept silently. Onlookers lined the streets to see the very rare and uncomfortable sight of a living woman, a woman previously seen as sacred, being carried through her own funeral and to witness what Plutarch called 'the most frightening sight'. This may sound morbid but I know for a fact that if, for whatever reason, a hearse was driving around my town with a live person in a coffin I would also take a look. The procession was not short: it marched from the home of the Vestals (presumably) in the Forum all the way to the Colline Gate in the far north of the city, near enough where Michelangelo's Porta Pia now stands. That's a walk of about 1.5 miles. An interminable, humiliating half an hour of being displayed in the streets as a corpse.

Once the procession reached the Colline Gate, Oppia was unchained, but kept veiled so that no one could see her face and take pity on her, and led or shoved down a ladder into a pre-prepared underground cell dug out from the earth. Inside the cell waited the things that Romans considered to be life's basic necessities: water, bread, milk and oil, along with an oil lamp, a bed and a blanket.[18] The Pontifex Maximus and all the other priests then turned away so that they would not witness men pulling up the ladder and heaping earth over the hole in the ground. The earth was smoothed over so that it was hard to tell where the entrance to the cell had previously been, and then all the priests simply walked away. Oppia was left alive in the small, dark cave, smelling of earth and burning olive oil, staring at her jug of milk and waiting to die.

This somewhat ridiculous and time-consuming ritual was enacted by the Pontiffs so that the Romans could, essentially, sacrifice a woman to expiate her impurity and win back the favour of the gods without actually sacrificing her. Sure, they put her in a hole and left her there but she had a lamp and a bit of bread and so *if* she died, that wasn't *really* their fault. They very much took an out of sight, out of mind approach to Vestal execution, whereby they could tell themselves that they hadn't *truly* executed anyone and absolutely definitely had not enacted a human sacrifice and no one could prove otherwise.

A common interpretation of the live burial is that Romans buried a Vestal when they were feeling powerless; when external or internal threats were scaring Romans so much that they felt they had to do *something* to bring the gods back onside and repair their fortunes. In 483 BCE, the combined threats of the Volsci and the Veii, along with the internal conflicts that would turn out to be just the start of the Conflict of the Orders, freaked the Romans out. The Romans were never a passive people. As a culture, they acted very much like politicians in *Yes, Minister*: they needed to do something; punishing a Vestal was something, therefore they must do it. And so – confronted with the first multifaceted crisis of the Republic – they did something. They buried a woman alive. And then, eleven years later, they did it again.

A sickness began to rampage through the city in 472 BCE. This happened with some regularity, due to it being 2,400 years before the invention of penicillin, but this time the sickness hit pregnant women especially hard. Dozens of women

suffered miscarriages or stillbirths, and many of them died along with their babies, spreading horror throughout Rome. Once again, omens and prodigies started to pile up as terrified Romans turned to their gods for help and the gods looked down and whispered 'no'. As had happened previously, the augers and haruspices came out to search for signs and messages, but before they could announce their findings someone gave the Pontiffs the answer. An enslaved man came forward and informed the priests that a Vestal Virgin named Urbina had been unchaste and caused all the problems. As only a decade had passed and many of the priesthoods were lifetime appointments, it's likely that at least a couple of the men who had to oversee the investigation and trial of Urbina had been in position for Oppia's execution, which is grim to imagine.

In another horrible moment of history repeating itself, two men were again accused of 'defiling' Urbina. This time, one took his own life while the other was executed publicly. Urbina, meanwhile, suffered the same fate that had been inflicted on Oppia, whom she quite probably knew (unless she was, unbearably, under the age of ten when they executed her). With this action, and Urbina interred to breathe her last in her own grave, the gods were sated and the sickness passed.[19] No more Vestals were buried for another 150 years, when Minucia was walled into her cell because the Senate had collapsed during a war, and a dictator had been incorrectly appointed, causing a complete breakdown of the government.[20] When bad things happened, the Romans needed to act and, surprisingly often, their action involved burying a priestess alive. This isn't to say either that Romans took the burial of Vestals lightly, or that they did it out of anything other than a very sincere religious conviction. But it was always – at least in the semi-legendary stories – an option.

The horrid little upside of these burials, however, is that we know the names and experiences of some women who would otherwise have been entirely lost to the monstrous dark of history. I did a little maths and worked out that the Vestals existed as an institution in Rome from about 700 BCE until at least 382 CE, when their privileges were removed by the emperor Gratian. That's a very approximate span of 1,082 years of Vestal Virgins. Being enormously conservative, because I hate numbers, I pretended that every single Vestal did their thirty-year term and no less (even though this definitely isn't true), giving us thirty-six 'generations' of Vestals across that millennium. With six women per 'generation', we have a bare minimum of 216 women who served as Vestals. That's the smallest possible number. Of those 216, we know the names of just sixty-five. Every single Vestal who served during the first six hundred years of the office is known only because they were accused of *incestum.* When Laurel Thatcher Ulrich said (about American puritans) that 'Well behaved women seldom make history', this is exactly the kind of thing she was talking about.[21] Good behaviour might get you praised in your lifetime, but it probably means that you will completely disappear after your death.

In the wider view, the sanctification and repeated live burial of Vestal Virgins demonstrates the exceptional importance of these priestesses to Rome and to Roman identity. Romanness and female religious observance were bound so tightly together as to be two halves of the same whole. Because of this, they (sometimes unwillingly) bore an exceptional burden as individuals, but these women provided a sacred, immutable service for the Roman community. Rome could not exist without the goddess Vesta and her six powerful women.

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† The Archaic Triad was largely replaced by the time of the Late Republic with the more familiar Capitoline Triad, being Jupiter, Mars and Minerva.

† Just for reference, in case you, dear reader, are not a Greek mythology buff, the Big Twelve Olympian gods of Achaean myth are Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Athena, Artemis, Ares, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Hermes, Apollo and either Dionysus or Hestia depending on the era. Their Roman counterparts are Jupiter, Juno, Neptune, Ceres, Minerva, Diana, Mars, Vulcan, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus and Vesta. Apollo has no direct counterpart but is sometimes called Phoebus in Latin poetry.

† The world *incestum* there is a bit of a red herring and does not mean incest, so try not to think of it too much. *Incestum* is a 'false friend', developed from the original *in castium*, unchaste. Wildfang, 2006: 54.

† The first was Pinaria, during the reign of Tarquinius Priscus, *c*.600 BCE.

Hispala Faecenia

186 BCE

The Informer

You might have noticed by now that women in Roman history and legend seem to appear only at times of crisis and commotion. You might think that this was a result of me picking out the most dramatic or exciting events of the early centuries of Rome, and that would be reasonable to think, but I have in fact included just about every woman in Roman history so far who warranted more than a single line in the histories that survived the millennia. Thatcher Ulrich's aphorism survives on tea towels for a reason, and it was quadruply so in the Roman Republic where women had to get themselves involved in a spectacular political crisis in order to be remembered. No one is ever involved in a spectacular political or religious crisis in a *good* way. Which brings us to one of the most famous crises of the Roman Republic and the story of how Hispala Faecenia broke open the Bacchanalia Conspiracy.

We are now solidly in the Middle Republic and Rome is now a dominant force across the continent. When priests buried Oppia alive in 483 BCE, Rome was reeling from fights with local Italian cities. If you stood on the walls of Rome, you could practically see the cities of the problematic Volsci, they were that close. Rome was still, in the fifth century BCE, a player in a small-scale game for local territory. By 186 BCE, however, Rome had decisively won that game. Rome unequivocally ruled all of Italy and was now making severe inroads into Europe, Eurasia and North Africa. Rome won the great, existential war with Hannibal and reduced North Africa's greatest city, Carthage, to rubble and salt in 202 BCE. The Roman army no longer besieged cities so close to Rome they could ride back to spy on their wives; instead, they besieged cities in Spain and Turkey and Tunisia. They fought the Seleucids and Thracians and Aetolians.†

All of this brought much military glory to Rome, which is of no interest to me at all, but it also brought a whole new kind of crisis as Roman society changed in the wake of all these victories, and aristocratic Romans, who mostly no longer went to war personally, found themselves traumatised by the horror of being too rich. A real moral panic around luxury emerged. Triumphal parades, held to celebrate Roman military victories and called Triumphs, had become wild displays of literal gold that boggled onlookers, with Gaius Manlius and Marcus Flavius displaying a combined 330,000 pounds of silver and 2,346 pounds of gold in the year 187 BCE, plus 523,642 miscellaneous gold coins, several hundred gold crowns, 785 bronze statues and 230 marble statues, all looted from far-away cities.[1] Along with all this glorious loot (and the innumerable newly enslaved men, women and children) came access to trade routes and traders and extremely fun new stuff.

The Senate began to enact laws against 'excessive' luxury in 213 BCE and maintained a constant internal battle about whether luxury represented Rome's success or was inherently un-Roman. For the most part, sumptuary laws didn't last and those who proposed them were clearly seen as hard-line conservative loons by their contemporaries, but they were valorised by later historians who imagined and

idealised a glorious, austere Roman past. Livy, for his part, fell firmly on the anti-luxury side. In particular he called out bronze couches (gasp!), tables with a single pedestal (no!), rugs (rugs!), female harp players (my god!) and the art of cooking good food (wait, what?) as being revolting foreign dangers which could seriously undermine Roman morals.[2] When Livy wrote about Tarpeia selling out her city for bracelets, it was just the first in a series of his morality tales about how decadence corrupts Romanness. And along with all these monstrous things – these insufficiently pedestalled tables – came foreign religious practices to threaten everything Roman about Rome.

Our heroine is Hispala Faecenia, who lived in Rome on the Aventine Hill. Hispala is variously referred to by modern writers as a prostitute, a courtesan, a paramour, a mistress and a lover. Her status as a woman who was once enslaved is hammered home by the apparently mandatory use of the term 'freed-woman' instead of just 'woman' to describe her. In Latin, Hispala began life as an *ancilla*, an enslaved woman, and then became a *liberta*, a freedwoman. During her life, she was always categorised, linguistically and legally, as a person who was not a *femina* (an elite, respectable woman), or even a *mulier* (free woman). She was always separated from the category of 'woman', which was open only to people who never experienced slavery or sex work, and this categorisation has continued into English usage, where her gender is always constrained by her legal status. Don't let anyone ever tell you that 'woman' isn't a constructed term.

Anyway, these terms are largely attempts to clean up the language Livy uses to describe her: *scortum*, meaning low-class whore. Modern writers seem to want to 'upgrade' Hispala from common sex worker to charming courtesan (*meretrix*) whose work was not explicitly paid for – much like sugar babies, or Holly Golightly – but Livy is pretty clear that Hispala made her living as a prostitute.

Hispala lived an almost unbelievable rags-to-riches Hollywood tale. Her life began in slavery, where she was the chattel property of a woman who put her to work as a sex slave. This was not an uncommon experience for enslaved people, whether male or female, for whom sexual availability was part of the job and sex was for sale in just about every public space. If you are imagining a grim life, you are probably right. Research on ancient sex work suggests that women (and men, as there was a thriving male sex work industry) who worked in brothels experienced far more robbery, beatings, rapes and physical and emotional abuses than those who didn't.[3] However, sex work in the Roman world was largely decriminalised, its income taxable and brothels loosely overseen by junior magistrates (called *aediles*) within the Roman state.[4] Sex work itself ranged from streetwalking and quick sex in rented cells off busy streets, to courtesans who entertained the wealthy in long-term relationships. The entire industry, however, was dominated by enslaved and formerly enslaved people of every gender, making it inextricable from the inherent violence and domination of slavery as an institution.

When I think about the position of Roman enslaved sex workers – or the enslaved in general – I think about Marina Abramović's 1974 performance piece *Rhythm 0.* For this, she stood for six hours in front of an array of seventy-two items, including roses, a glass, a whip, a gun and bullet and a knife, and a sign describing herself as an object. By the end of those six hours, Marina was naked, bleeding; she had been repeatedly sexually assaulted and almost killed. The violence began slowly but, as visitors gradually realised that there really would be no social consequences for anything they did to her, it escalated quickly. People cut her clothes off with razor blades, one person cut her throat to suck her blood, another aimed a loaded gun at her head. 'It was six hours of real horror,' she later

said.[5] Social responses define behaviours. When people are presented as objects, as enslaved people were in the Roman world, and there are no social consequences, when people *can* be treated with all the care with which one treats a used tissue, someone will abuse them and enjoy it.

As Hispala herself proves, however, Roman sex workers were not passive objects of cruel desire. Many took pride in the work they did even though they did not choose it, and many, like Hispala, continued in the industry once they gained freedom. When we encounter Hispala in 186 BCE, she lived on the Aventine Hill in the centre of Rome but continued to support herself by working in the sex industry, probably in a brothel given Livy's horrible term for her work, and apparently, she was good at it. Livy describes her as *nobile* – celebrated or famous. The kind of famous prostitute who might have been included in Suetonius's lost magnum opus *Lives of Famous Prostitutes.* I like to imagine her as one of the workers in Pompeii's famous brothel who proudly described themselves as being flipping brilliant at blowjobs on the walls ('*Murtis: felatris*' reads one).[†]

She also had a boyfriend, an upper middle-class lad of Equestrian rank called Publius Aebutius.[†] Aebutius also lived on the Esquiline with his mother, Duronia, and his wicked step-father, whose name isn't important. Aebutius and Hispala began as neighbours and gradually fell in love. Aebutius didn't get on with his parents, who gave him only the meagerest pocket money, so he spent most of his nights at Hispala's house, and Hispala topped up his allowance with her own hard-earned cash. She loved him so much that she had even gone out of her way to ask to be given a guardian by the *praetor* so that she could make Aebutius her primary heir, a gesture that was a lot more romantic in a Roman context than it may seem. We don't know what Aebutius brought to the friendship, but it must have been something because Hispala cared for him enough to cause an Italy-wide crisis to save him.

The crisis began one night as Aebutius and Hispala were lounging at her place, chatting over some decent wine. Aebutius had just recovered from some unknown illness, but he was casual and jesting when he told her that he would not be able to see her for a couple of weeks because he was being initiated into the Mysteries of Bacchus by his mother. Duronia had told him that she had made an oath that she would bring him to the Bacchic rites if he recovered from his illness. As he had indeed recovered, she was now compelled by the bonds of obligation to take him along to be initiated and so he was required to observe ten days of complete chastity in preparation. Thus, he'd not be visiting his girlfriend until the initiation was over. None of this appeared to be a big deal to young Aebutius, who assumed his mother had his best interests at heart, so it came as a surprise when Hispala promptly lost her shit.

Screaming that it would be better for both of them to die than for Aebutius to become an initiate of Bacchus, Hispala reared up in hysterical fury. To Aebutius's shock, Hispala began to spit curses and to threaten to hurt whoever had suggested he be initiated. Taken aback, Aebutius reassured her that his parents had suggested it, and no one could want to harm him less than his own mother. Hispala, un-reassured, continued to scream and Aebutius continued to promise her that he would be fine. The problem, according to Livy, was that Hispala was right. Aebutius's mother did in fact want to harm him. Duronia had illegally lost or spent all of Aebutius's rightful patrimony and knew that when he turned twenty-one and found out that she had made him destitute, she'd be in trouble. So, Duronia and her husband had come up with a fantastically bananas plan: they would trick the oblivious young Aebutius into enrolling in the Bacchic Mysteries, and, between the

initiation and the celebratory rites that took place, they assumed that Aebutius would either die or end up socially and psychologically ruined to such an extent that he would never be able to marry or need his money. It's a ruse that Poirot would see through in one second flat, but the Roman world was sadly lacking in tiny egg-shaped Belgian geniuses, so they may well have gotten away with it if only it weren't for that pesky girlfriend.

If you've ever read Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* then you might have an inkling of how a religious ceremony could destroy a person. Livy, god bless him, provides his readers with both a potted (imaginary) history of the cult of Bacchus and not just one, but *two* detailed descriptions of what happened during Bacchic ceremonies. The cult of Bacchus was a mystery cult, a personal cult not part of the official religious life of the state and which required worshippers to be initiated into secret rites. This wasn't a problem *per se.* Individual cults demanding private, rather than communal, dedication were not particularly rare and formed a normal part of ancient polytheistic religious life. You might have heard of the cult of Mithras and, if you're ever in London, I recommend you visit the Mithraeum residing in the basement of the Bloomberg building. They've spent an eyewatering and extremely welcome amount of money on protecting the temple and creating a heart-stopping multimedia recreation of an underground Mithraic ceremony and it bangs.

The Bacchanalia, however, were a bit different to other mystery cults. According to Livy, who made this up, the rites had entered southern Italy via an anonymous Greek fortune teller and travelled up through Italy until they reached Rome. Originally, the Bacchanalia had been a women-only space. At least since 405 BCE when Euripides premiered his tragedy *The Bacchae* in Athens, Bacchic worshippers had been perceived as exclusively female and the Bacchanalia had been known as a space where women took all their clothes off, went hysterical and ripped people apart. Had it remained a women-only religion, it might never have caused a Roman crisis. But at some point, Livy says, a woman from Campania named Paculla Annia had initiated her sons Minius and Herennius Cerrinius (incredibly fun to say out loud), thus allowing men into the party. Annia, ever the trailblazer, also increased the frequency of Bacchic meetings from three days a year to five times a month. A month! I don't know who has the time or energy to go to anything five times a month, but it's not me.

Bacchic rites, as described by both Livy and Euripides, and second-century BCE Roman comedy writer Plautus, were exactly what you are probably imagining. Descriptions don't always line up with one another – indeed Livy's several descriptions, separated by mere pages, don't completely align – but there are some common denominators.[6] They began with lots and lots and lots of wine and good food. Bacchus, aka Dionysus, was the god of wine so that was non-negotiable and already a red flag for conservative Romans who were not mad keen on Roman women drinking wine. Then came the music. Drums and cymbals are particularly mentioned by all the writers, crashing and banging at deafening volumes and accompanied by singers raising their voices in throbbing hymns of praise to Bacchus. To the rhythm of the music, the worshippers danced and howled at the sky, becoming more and more excited until the energy burst out in hysterical, uncontrolled acts. Some people writhed with 'fanatical twistings of the body' speaking prophecies and other gibberish. Women let their hair down and had sex with men. That's about as bad as it got for women, but for men the Bacchic rituals opened up all kinds of life-ruining potential. Livy is very insistent about the orgy element, and particularly draws attention to men having sex with men. It's

amusingly notable then that he never imagines the women having sex with one another. Not even a cheeky girl-on-girl snog. Women just did cis-het sex and, of course, the killings.

Livy describes men being beaten and killed, torn limb from limb, with no one able to hear their screams over the overwhelming noise of the drums and the cymbals and the songs and the cries of all the other participants. Priests set up machines to drag men who refused to be abused away to their deaths in caves as a bizarre (and bizarrely intricate) recreation of mortals being whisked away by gods.[7] Male initiates, who all had to be under the age of twenty, were a particular delicacy, offered to the Bacchic priests (who are men now in Livy's telling) as sacrificial victims, to be violated and raped and killed and disappeared 'so that their bodies were not even found for burial'.[8]

So far, so Donna Tartt. The frenzy, the dancing, the music, the killings. All very familiar. All five times a month (which is a lot of missing and murdered people if you think about it). But the Roman twist on the Bacchic chaos was to introduce corruption into the public sphere via the menfolk. In Livy's vision of the Bacchanalia, amid the wailing and the crashing and the banging and the screaming and the various bodily fluids, high caste men also had serious meetings and plotted conspiracies to give false evidence in court, to forge seals and wills and documents, to rig legal cases and to generally pervert and undermine the workings of the Roman *Res Publica.*[†] Sometimes, they even planned elaborate poisonings and murders outside of the rites themselves, bringing sneaky untrustworthy nastiness into the good Roman world. It is, I confess, very funny to me to imagine three fully dressed guys nursing their cups of mediocre wine and attempting to secretly co-ordinate some perjury over the Bacchic cacophony of music and screaming, while an orgy keeps bumping them on one side and someone is having a tough time ripping off the arm of an initiate on the other. That's just objectively funny. Another objectively funny element is that all these Bacchanalia took place in a wooded spot by the Tiber called the grove of Stimula. I love Romans.

This is the sensory nightmare that Hispala knew about. She would later reveal that she had been taken to the rites without consent, and presumably initiated against her will, by her former enslaver. When she heard that her beloved teenage Aebutius was to be initiated, she remembered the 'mingling of males with females, youth with age, that had destroyed every sentiment of modesty' and 'the promiscuous matings of free men and women'. She imagined him being attacked, violated, involved in all kinds of violent acts against his person and possibly even killed. Or, worse, involved in a complex conspiracy to fake some documents leading to his disgrace. She begged Aebutius not to go 'where all disgraceful practices would have first to be endured and then performed', and when he hesitated, she barricaded him into her house and refused to let him leave until he promised that he would defy his mother and refuse to attend.[9]

Aebutius, young, dumb and full of love, eventually agreed and pottered his way home, where he promptly told his mother and stepfather that he wouldn't be going through with the initiation. Duronia was predictably furious. She began by attacking Hispala, claiming that she had poisoned him against his mother and the gods with the power of her fanny, and repeatedly implying that he was throwing over his respectable family and his obligations for a freedwoman. Duronia attempted to berate Aebutius into obedience but he refused to back down. The fight escalated wildly, until the stepfather, accompanied by four enslaved men, physically removed Aebutius from the house. Quite what they thought this would accomplish is unknown. Presumably they thought that Aebutius, who had no access

to his own estate, would come crawling back in, begging for forgiveness. They apparently forgot that he not only had a well-off girlfriend who gave him money, he also had a paternal family. A rich paternal family.

Aebutius, bewildered, rolled up to his paternal aunt's house and relayed the whole affair. His aunt was called Aebutia, because Romans. The aunt, an apparently sensible woman of whom Enid Blyton would approve, took him in, listened to his tale and recommended that he report it to the consul, Spurius Postumius. Postumius, when he heard that some Equestrian teenager wanted to talk to him about dodgy religious stuff, wasn't hugely interested so he decided to bring in his mother-in-law to help him out and make the whole situation way more complicated than it needed to be.

Postumius persuaded his mother-in-law, Sulpicia, to invite Aebutia over for an afternoon chat. During their old lady teatime, the consul wandered in, inexplicably pretending that he had arrived by sheer chance and that he just *happened* to be really interested in what Aebutia's wee nephew was up to these days. Genuinely pointless behaviour but the Romans loved a weird ruse. Aebutia immediately burst into tears and described Aebutius's agonies and his being thrown out of his home because he had refused to be initiated into rites that were, so the stories said, completely obscene. Postumius nodded along and made sympathetic noises and pretended that he had heard of the Bacchanalia. He decided that he would hear out this Aebutius but he also wanted to talk to the source of these stories about obscene rites. He wanted to meet Hispala. And so he got Sulpicia to invite her over for tea too.

Hispala, up until this point, had lived a life thoroughly separated from consuls and politicians unless she was having sex with one of them for money. One of the reasons that Hispala is so great to read about is that her early life story offers a very, very rare literary glimpse into a life divorced from the public sphere of war, politics and rhetoric (and weird ruses). She lived what might be called an ordinary life until this point, a small life. Her life of slavery, manumission, sex work, romance and graft is usually swallowed by History but was lived by countless millions of men and women throughout the whole span of human existence. She lived a life of shades of grey, where she was prostituted by an enslaver but continued with the work after her manumission, and a life which sheds light on the levels of control that enslavers had over the people they claimed ownership of. Hispala, as an enslaved woman, was forcibly enrolled into a mystery cult and coerced into taking part in religious rituals that violated her ethics and beliefs. Her enslaver, not content with owning and controlling Hispala's body, wanted her spirit too. Obviously, we can guess that this happened from both common sense and the slavery manuals that were written by free Roman men, but it is unique to see it presented from the perspective of the enslaved person in literature, and with sympathy for her experience as a person with an inner life. In the vast majority of other Roman literature, women who suffered slavery, even those who were manumitted, remain largely invisible. So much of what we know about them as individuals comes from fragments and snippets and in writing which tends to be dismissive at best, downright cruel at worst. That Hispala in Livy's telling is a woman with feelings and complexities is just wonderful.

The other interesting part of Hispala's story, and the level of detail Livy dedicates to it, is that we get to see how women interacted with one another and with their male relatives to make things happen. Aebutius only gets his audience with the consul because his aunt has a reputation as 'an honest woman with traditional morals' and because she can meet with Sulpicia.[10] Meanwhile,

Postumius relies on his mother-in-law to give him advice, to act as his agent, to gather information for him and offer him her honest opinion. When Hispala is called to see Postumius, bringing his big world of ruling a small empire crashing into her small life of trying to look out for her boyfriend, it is Sulpicia who summons her and who offers her a promise that she will not be harmed if she tells the truth. Without these three women, nothing happens in this story, the wheels of Roman politics don't move and all the men remain as clueless about the debaucheries occurring on their doorstep as they always were. This kind of low-key diplomacy over lunches among the women who were related to powerful men kept those wheels greased and smoothly moving in ways that are almost as invisible as *ancillae* and *libertae* were. It's not often we get to see women's actual roles in Roman politics, although we know that they were always involved because they were, y'know, alive and in the house. Old textbooks (and some new ones) about Roman life had a bad habit of writing many chapters about all kinds of details of life and then one single chapter on 'women and slaves' as if those things were both the same (not sure that women like Sulpicia would enjoy being lumped together with enslaved miners TBH) and completely separated from men's things like conversations and dinner and going to the theatre. Obviously, this is a ridiculous perspective that actively misrepresents reality, but it persists in large part because images of women working alongside men and being an active part of what is often called the 'male sphere' are so rare.

Now back to our story. Sulpicia sent lictors to go and pick Hispala up, causing her to near faint with terror, and they took her to Sulpicia's house where she was ushered into a private room and confronted with the actual consul of Rome. Postumius revealed why they had brought her in, asking her to tell them about the Bacchanalia. At this, Hispala had what sounds like a full panic attack, shaking so much that she was unable to speak for a long time while Sulpicia tried to soothe her. Livy implies that the Bacchic conspiracies were so powerful and so evil that the very idea of talking about the Bacchic rites and Bacchic priests terrified the poor woman into silence.[11]

To her credit, and demonstrating an impressive courage, Hispala tried to stonewall the consul, claiming that she had no knowledge of the current situation and that everything she had said to Aebutius had been idle pillow talk. When Postumius lost his temper with her, she alternated between clinging to Sulpicia's ankles begging for mercy and cursing out that idiot Aebutius for dropping her *right* in it. This continued for a while as Hispala feared for her life while the consul impatiently shouted at her until she revealed the source of her terror. She was, she claimed, not just afraid of the consul in front of her, or the god whose secrets she held (and who would not be happy *at all* at their revelation). She feared the male initiates of the cult who would, if they ever discovered that she had told even Aebutius about their rites, hunt her down and kill her brutally, bloodily and painfully. So she negotiated: she would tell them what she knew if they would remove her from Rome and protect her. Postumius grinned and promised her more than that. If she would spill the Bacchic tea, he would ensure she could live safely in Rome. His promise worked and Hispala started talking. She described the orgies and the men wriggling in hysterical frenzy. She described the music and the corruption and, allegedly, included some *very* specific details about women walking into the Tiber holding flaming torches and coming out with the torches still burning because they were made of sulphur and calcium. Weird detail. She described the murders and the threats keeping initiates both obedient and silent. She described the whole history of the cult in Italy and explained that the cult was

specifically targeting aristocratic men under twenty. Finally, she told them that there were thousands and thousands of members, including aristocratic men and women, 'by now virtually amounting to a second city-population'.[12]

You might be wondering how these parties which, you'll remember, occurred more than once a week in a grove that was about a half a mile from the Forum and which were apparently so loud as to drown out the screams of dying and assaulted men, had somehow not been noticed by the fricking consul. Or any of the other five hundred members of the Senate. Turns out that Postumius and his colleagues *had* noticed the 'noise and shrieking at night that resound throughout the city' and had simply not worried about it, assuming that it was a 'lawful form of entertainment and amusement' that they simply hadn't been invited to. That's the kind of minding your own business that Londoners would be proud of.[13] Finally discovering the source of the noises he'd been hearing on a weekly basis, an outraged Postumius moved fast to resolve the situation.

First, he immediately moved both Aebutius and Hispala into a Roman Witness Protection Programme. For Hispala, this meant she was moved into an upper-level apartment within Sulpicia's own home. To ensure that the apartment remained secure, Sulpicia had the access stairs that led to the street removed and built a new staircase inside the building. Attendants were sent to bring Hispala's furniture and clothing over and – this is a fun little detail – her slaves. This is another thing I like about this story: Hispala is so unrevolutionary, so dedicated to the status quo that she not only (inadvertently) gives up a conspiracy (of sorts) within the state, she also perpetuates within her own home the violence of domination she herself experienced. She is *that* normal. Anyway. Aebutius was moved into the home of one of Postumius's clients and from here on they go silent in Livy's narrative.

Postumius took the affair to the Senate and made a big speech outlining the horrors he had uncovered, explaining that allowing 'random and unregulated' religious gatherings was un-Roman and presenting the whole cult as a vast conspiracy against Roman power and the Roman way of life. He unleashed a massive investigation across the whole of Italy with sentries posted to break up any night-time gatherings. Alleged priests and initiates were arrested *en masse* and rewards were offered for anyone who turned in a participant. The investigation led to the denunciation of over seven thousand people and the identification of four ringleaders who were believed to be the head priests of the cult. Homes were searched, shrines were smashed and Roman officials and soldiers appeared on the streets of every town to intimidate everyone. Some of those seven thousand identified Bacchic initiates were merely imprisoned, others were executed or took their own lives. Women were handed over to their families for execution.[14] The repression of the cult was harsh, swift and widespread, a demonstration of Roman hegemony throughout the entire peninsula. This is all described by Livy and, in a happy little miracle of survival, in a copy of the *senatus consultum* (decree) produced by Postumius and his colleague Quintus Marcius and distributed around Italy.[15] This copy was discovered in 1640 in Tiriolo, in Italy's toe, 380 miles from Rome, demonstrating how far one guy was able to exert his will, and how far Hispala's panicked outburst in her bedroom had rippled.

The story that Livy tells about this first religious oppression obviously makes no sense. Setting aside the whole family drama, his understanding of why the Roman Senate decided they needed to crush the Bacchanalia so completely is confused at best. On the one hand, the rapes and murders seem pretty bad, but on the other, Postumius, in his speeches and decrees, does not consider them to be problematic. Instead, Postumius and the rest of the Senate consider the existence of

the cult in and of itself to be a vast, treasonous conspiracy. The Senate was prompted to act with speed and viciousness by the night-time secrets and sense that the initiates tried, somehow, to undermine the Roman political and legal system. The *senatus consultum* found in Tiriolo doesn't mention sexual assaults, homosexuality, orgies, women with loose hair or bloody murders. Instead, it specifically outlaws conspiracies:

> let no one wish to have any money in common; let no one wish to make any man or woman either a magistrate or pro-magistrate; Let no one after this wish to conspire among themselves, or to swear oaths in common, or to make mutual pledges or promises; let no one wish to pledge faith among themselves.[16]

The whole frenzied tearing people apart and non-consensual debauchery seems to have been, legally, rather by-the-by. This contradiction has led historians to posit various explanations for the repressive actions of the Senate, from presenting it as an explicitly anti-feminist and anti-working-class action designed to put down an organisation led by and for non-elite women, to considering it a fake flag operation to exert Roman power across Italy in the regulation of diverse religious practices.[17] Maybe it was the involvement of men with a traditionally female cult that was the problem, or maybe it was the organisation of the cult which threatened the Roman status quo.[18] Maybe the whole affair was a specific attack on Etruscan elites in Etruria and Campania – people like the Volsci and the Volsinii – who were still resisting Roman authority and disguising their resistance meetings as Bacchic religious meetings, in which case what on earth is all Livy's interpersonal teenage drama in the heart of Rome all about?[19] If you are interested in the political history of Rome then the whole affair as described by Livy is a monstrous head-scratcher, driving political historians to occasionally publish articles that could be crudely summarised as 'Livy, mate, what the *fuck*'.[20] Thankfully, we don't need to try and make sense of the situation. We just need to know that it happened, and that it allowed Livy to write quite a good story.

Normally, in Livy's stories, the woman would disappear now and a new story would start – usually one involving a battle with some people you've never heard of – but, very pleasingly, he gives us a sort of resolution to Hispala's story. Postumius and the rest of the Senate were so delighted by the bravery of Hispala and Aebutius that they decided to grant them both massive rewards. Naturally, this meant cold hard cash, and each got 100,000 *asses* from the public treasury, but each also received social and legal benefits. As a free male of the Equestrian order, Aebutius already had all the social privileges of his class so Aebutius's social reward was exemption from military service, but Hispala lived under a huge number of restrictions as a formerly enslaved woman who worked in a profession legally designated as *infames*. The rewards she was granted demonstrate the breadth of these restrictions and how they were perceived as privileges by the Romans: she was allowed to sell, dispose of and draw on her own property; she was given the right to choose her own guardian, instead of being assigned one by the state; she was allowed to marry anyone she chose, including free-born men, without the husband losing his status.[21] That these were granted by Senatorial decree as spectacular rewards for exceptional service to Rome demonstrates the level of restrictions formerly enslaved women endured in their daily lives in Rome.

Hispala was an unmarried, manumitted woman with a career who could own movable property (such as furniture, jewellery and people), but she could not buy

or sell land. In order to do anything legally, she had to have the permission of a male guardian assigned to her who could be as benevolent or as cruel as he wanted to be. Finally, her right to marry was severely limited. Free-born people could marry those who had experienced slavery, but the stain of slavery was something that never washed off, socially and legally speaking, and so the free-born person would have to sacrifice their honour, dignity and reputation in order to marry for love. Obviously this did sometimes happen, but there was enormous social and cultural pressure not to, and that's why concubinage and other forms of semi-formal long-term relationships other than marriage existed in the Roman world.[22] With these restrictions lifted, though, Hispala was allowed to live the life that women of the Patrician class lived, with access to the rights and benefits of marriage and the freedom to do what she wanted with the property she owned. She was freed from the eternal stigma of being enslaved, and all she had to do was bring down an empire-spanning religious conspiracy.

That's the last we ever hear of Hispala. I would like to imagine that she and Aebutius were able to marry and live a happy life together with their little nest egg, allowing Hispala to retire from sex work, should she wish to, but perhaps she never forgave him for forcing her into the whole ordeal. Maybe she never married and continued her life and built herself a little empire of brothels. Maybe she was immediately run over by a donkey and died. We have no way of knowing. But her story reinforces the relationship between female religious practice and Roman identity, and the centrality of women to proper, idealised Roman life.

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† The Seleucids were the descendants of Alexander the Great's generals and they ruled West Asia. Fighting at this time took place in Greece (including a battle at Thermopylae) and Turkey. Thrace encompassed northern Greece, Bulgaria and parts of Turkey; Aetolia is the part of Greece around the Gulf of Corinth.

† Very loosely: 'Murtis is a professional at sucking cock.' On the argument that the sex workers themselves wrote these graffiti: *CIL* 4.2292. Levin-Richardson, 2019: 120–2.

† Romans loved a hierarchy and developed rigid social ranks with specific privileges and limitations. Equestrians were the second highest rank, below Senators. They could be as rich as the Senatorial class as they were allowed to engage in business (which Senators were not) and had significant social power but less political power.

† *Res Publica* is the origin of the word Republic and is what the Romans called their government. It translates to public affairs or the business of the people.

Clodia

60 BCE

The Palatine Medea

By 60 BCE, Rome's tendrils were wrapped around the Mediterranean. The Empire spread through Albania, Greece, Macedonia and Turkey, it stretched across the seas absorbing Sicily, Malta, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, it wriggled through the Alps to fight wars on the banks of the Rhone and everyone from Belgium to Syria was getting very, very nervous about where they'd be looking next. The Romans stripped each place it conquered to the bone. Everything, from their sacred statues to their children, was rounded up by some posh Italian bastard, tied to a cart and shipped back to Rome where it was sold to the highest bidder. And then, once each city state from Avignon to Athens had been drained of all its movable resources, the merchants poured in and the trade routes opened up. Fancy goods from China, India, Arabia, Egypt and virtually the whole of Europe began first to trickle and then to flood into the city of Rome. For a lot of people, this constant Roman expansion meant that they led truly appalling lives of war, rape and slavery where their entire worlds were crushed by the unstoppable steamroller of indifferent Roman power. But for the 0.1% of Romans who were benefiting personally from the whole thing, the experience was glorious. And one of those 0.1%, living at the very tip of the top of every food chain, was the woman we now know as Clodia Metelli.

Clodia lived in the very last decades of the Roman Republic, born somewhere in the region of 95 BCE. We don't know what she looked like, a single sentence ever spoken by her, any of her likes or dislikes or much about her at all, except that by virtue of being very, very rich and very, very extroverted, she managed to piss off two men to such an extent that they wrote seminal, genre-defining works about her. Clodia managed to spread sadness around the Roman upper classes so successfully that she inspired Cicero to write a blistering speech to destroy her and Catullus to invent a whole new genre of poetry for her. As a result, she is remembered as one of the great bad girls of Roman history, a pouting, scheming, incestuous, vengeful seductress, embodying the very decline of ancient Roman morals all by herself. And really, isn't that the legacy we all want?

The identification of Clodia Metelli with all the sources believed to be about her is not entirely iron-clad. There are three ancient sources for Clodia's life and works: Cicero's defence speech for his protégé Marcus Caelius, Catullus's poems about his married love, Lesbia, and Cicero's letters. There is no doubt about who Cicero was referring to in his speech. He was not an ambiguous man when he spoke. When he wrote letters, however, he tended to be less clear. In his letters, and in Catullus's poems, we know they are talking about *a* Clodia but, unfortunately, Clodia wasn't the only Clodia knocking about. She was one of three daughters and every single one of them was called Claudia. Two of the three sisters took to affecting a more modern, cooler version of their name, calling themselves Clodia, narrowing the field of people that Cicero and Catullus could be referring to by a third. Useful.

In modern sources, to make life easier for ourselves, historians have given each of the Clodiae a surname derived from her husband's name and so we call our protagonist Clodia Metelli: Metellus's Clodia. This is the kind of linguistic nightmare the Romans force us into. However, there is no concrete way to differentiate between the two in the ancient works. Both Cicero and Catullus simply assumed that their readers would know which Clodia they were writing about and neither was interested in helping you along if you didn't. This is a brutal reminder that they were basically all writing for their friends and relatives and were certainly not writing for audiences of nosy historians desperate for the 2,000-year-old gossip.

These days, historians seem generally settled on the decision that Clodia Metelli is the subject of all the sources mentioning a Clodia, largely because it works better for us if they don't refer to her sister. And frankly, if we can't prove the positive (All Clodias are Clodia Metelli) then no one can prove the negative (Some Clodias are not Clodia Metelli) either, so it doesn't matter. For our purposes, we're going with the fun option, but with the caveat that I am fully aware that I am choosing it because it's the fun option and the full awareness that neither the 'Clodia' of Cicero's speeches nor the 'Lesbia' of Catullus's erotic poems were – or particularly aimed to represent – real people. Both Clodia and Lesbia are constructions, inventions of their male authors, shaped by the conventions of their time, and merely based to some degree on a woman they knew. Alfred Hitchcock's Norman Bates, Tobe Hooper's Leatherface and Thomas Harris's Buffalo Bill were all 'based on' tormented double murderer (not a serial killer: I will die on this hill) Ed Gein, but not one of them tells us anything about the actual Ed Gein. We learn so little about Macbeth from Shakespeare's play about him that I was thirty-six years old before I learned Shakespeare hadn't made him up. Like Macbeth and Leatherface, Clodia and Lesbia exist primarily as works of fiction and only hint at the real woman, who was born Claudia.

As with all Romans in the aristocracy, to understand Clodia we need to know about her family. For five hundred years, the Claudii – most of whom had the first name Appius – dominated the Roman Republic. The first Claudius arrived in Rome in 504 BCE, according to family legend, was instantly made a Patrician because he was rich when he arrived and got elected consul within a decade. Virtually every generation of Claudians onwards offered a relentless parade of consuls and generals. It was a Claudian who overplayed his hand so badly and with such spectacular arrogance that he incited an epic Plebeian revolt that led to the re-founding of the Republic.[†] Did you ever wonder why the main road in and out of Rome was called the Via Appia? Because it was named after an Appius Claudius, the same Appius Claudius who also built the first Roman aqueduct. Claudians fought the Carthaginians in every Punic War, Claudians took Athens into the Roman Empire. They were censors and dictators and sat in every possible seat. No generation of the Roman Republic was free of the Claudians, and no generation of Plebeians was free from them. Because the Claudians, traditionally, *despised* the plebs. The family revelled in a loathsome snobbery and dedicated themselves over and over to maintaining aristocratic supremacy while keeping the plebs out of power and politics. They were, almost universally, astonishing bastards from start to finish.

Clodia and her siblings, however, lived in a new and interesting time. The Republic they were born into seethed with internal turmoil. The end of the Social Wars – the first big civil wars – shaped Clodia's earliest years. Clodia's father sided with the *optimate* Sulla in the conflict between the *populares* (populists who

supported the interests of the plebs), and the *optimates* (conservatives who called themselves the Best Men and that's all you need to know about them), and the *optimates* won. By the time Clodia hit marriageable age, Pompey ruled Rome unofficially, with Julius Caesar and Crassus coming up fast among the populares to challenge him. Clodia's father married her off as soon as he could to a respected *optimate*, Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer, one of Pompey's lieutenants. Her parents presumably expected that she would have a couple of kids and settle down to an unobtrusive life of perfume and lunches as the wife, sister and mother of consuls. Unfortunately for them, Clodia and her brother Clodius went all Jessica Mitford on the family, joined up with the *populares* and started causing absolute *havoc*.

Publius Clodius Pulcher is a story all of his own. He was a complete prick who pretty much used his wealth and privilege to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, regardless of religious taboos, social conventions, laws or ethics. Once, he got into a fight with Cicero because Cicero undermined his alibi in a trial. Clodius was so enraged by this, he had himself (illegally) adopted into a Plebeian family, got elected Tribune of the Plebs, proposed and passed a law *specifically and exclusively* targeting Cicero, prosecuted Cicero under this law, exiled him and then burned down his house. He was clearly a monster but it's impossible not to admire his level of entitled vileness. And Clodia acted, for most of her brother's life, as his furious sidekick.

As money poured into Rome like a river and individual generals became richer and richer, upper-class families started to compete with each other in every single aspect of life, including in women's dowries. A dowry, in case you don't know, is a big chunk of money and/or property given to a woman by her family when she enters a marriage. The aim is to ensure that a woman will never be left destitute by divorce or widowhood or a crap husband because she will always have her own property to rely on. It's a protection. As conspicuous consumption really took off in Rome, though, it became fashionable among the aristocracy to make wild displays of their wealth by giving their daughters enormous dowries including hundreds of thousands of *sesterces*, houses, enslaved people and tracts of land across Italy.[†] Look how much I own that I can afford to give a daughter, such a dowry said. However, Roman women could never administer their land or invest their money by themselves; they required a male guardian.

In the old Republic, when women got married they usually entered a legal contract called *manus* marriage, meaning that they became the ward of their husbands and their husbands took control of everything they owned. The woman was thus rather forced to get on with her husband and support him lest he ruin her financially. In the new Republic, on the other hand, the idea of handing over control of really staggering chunks of wealth to men who could be stabbing you in the face on a battlefield in the next three weeks looked much less attractive to many families, and so they married their women off but did not transfer their guardianship. This kind of marriage is called *sine manu* and meant that fathers or brothers continued to control female-owned property, allowing women to choose whether they wanted to support their husbands in their political lives or whether they wanted to work only to advance the interests of their biological families. Clodia had the ability to make that choice.

The first time that Clodia appears in the ancient sources is in January 62 BCE in a letter written by Cicero and addressed to her husband. Cicero (bear with me here, because this is long-winded) notes that he had asked Clodia to ask Metellus to ask his brother to stop being mean to Cicero because Cicero was, in his own words, the

saviour of the Republic.[1] This letter is the first and last time that she is called Claudia rather than Clodia in writing and also the only time that he is vaguely respectful about her. When he wrote this, Cicero was generally on good terms with Clodia, her husband and her brother, but that was not to last long. That same year, Cicero and Clodius would have their spectacular falling out and Cicero became noticeably less keen on Clodia as a result.

In 60 BCE, Clodius reappeared again in his letters, this time in a description of his barbed conversation with Clodius, recorded because he believed himself to have made some extremely good witticisms at Clodius's expense. In one conversation, Clodius complained that his sister, whose husband at the time was the consul, was withholding seats that he wanted at the games, saying she 'would only give him one foot' of space. Cicero, in classic Roman joke style, responded in a manner that is baffling and nonsensical but which he (and presumably others?) found very funny indeed: 'don't grumble about one foot in your sister's case.' He joked, 'You can always hoist the other.' I am pretty sure this is a joke about Clodius committing incest with his sisters because Cicero was the prime mover behind that rumour. And then he wondered why Clodius burned his house down. He did admit that this was a cruel joke, but excused himself because 'I really loathe that consular woman.'[2]

By 59 BCE, Cicero had stopped using Clodia's name at all and he took to referring to her by a cute little Greek nickname: Βοῶπις. English speakers pronounce this boōpis and it means Cow Eyes. It sounds like a terrible insult but it originates as an epithet for the goddess Hera, who was associated with cows, and it gives us our one insight into Clodia's possible appearance: she had big, sparkling, beautiful eyes. In fiction, and non-fiction, Clodia is usually described as being very beautiful, mostly because Catullus says his Lesbia is very beautiful, but he would say that, wouldn't he. No one (except Shakespeare) writes love poetry about how their beloved is actually quite off-putting visually but has a good personality. And he never goes much further than saying she is beautiful, which doesn't narrow it down much. Beyoncé and Audrey Hepburn are both very beautiful, but they don't look like one another.

Cicero, on the other hand, never lost the chance to reference Clodia's eyes. In several letters written before his exile he calls her Boōpis, and in his speeches he refers to her big flashing eyes.[3] When he refers to her in these terms, he does not appear to despise her. She usually appears as a participant in a dinner party chatting to Cicero's very best friend Atticus, or as the bearer of information. She takes news back and forth between Atticus and Cicero, between Crassus and Pompey – who were at this point running the empire in their illegitimate First Triumvirate with Julius Caesar – between Pompey and Clodius and Cicero. She appears to be travelling around, promoting her brother, protecting his interests, acting as his agent, passing on his messages, and – in Cicero's words – sounding the charge as her brother's war bugler.

The Clodia of Cicero's letters is a political actor with big eyes and her own path. Gone are the days of wives and sisters who sit at home spinning wool and giving sage advice to the men in their families, sweetly begging for indulgence. Gone are the days when a woman automatically became her husband's property. Clodia did not feel herself beholden to her husband's political interests or his unconditional support of Pompey and the *optimates*, but she took his consular privileges, such as space at the games, and wielded them as a weapon in her own political wars.

Equally, the Clodia of Cicero's pre-exile letters is a strong supporter of her brother, to the extent that he twice uses war terminology to describe her support,

but she is not subservient to him either. When he wants those seats at the games for his clients, she refuses to hand them over. Presumably she had her own uses for them. Despite Cicero's very public disputes with Clodius, including spats in the Senate and in the streets, Clodia still gave him information and he still spoke to her. In April 59 BCE, he tells Atticus that 'the infamous Cow Eyes is going to report to you when she gets back from Solonium',[4] although by August of that year he needs Atticus to talk to Clodia to find out whether her brother is *really* going to have him exiled (he is).

This Clodia operates within the highest realms of political influence. She acts as a vital link in the chains of negotiation that made up Roman political life. She comes across as a fierce, and maybe slightly frightening, Roman *matrona*, an elite wife and sister with an intense interest in the public life of her family. She fits into the mould of other Republican upper-class women, like Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, or her own contemporary, Mark Antony's wife Fulvia. She is a blessed woman, as rich and as free as a Roman woman could get, acting as an informant and a mediator for the most powerful men in the western world.

If these letters were all that had survived of Clodia, we would think of her as a feisty feminist icon. Unfortunately for Clodia, however, Cicero was exiled by her brother who then burned down his house *and* had Cicero's land consecrated so that Cicero could never rebuild. When he was allowed to return to Rome in 57 BCE after eighteen months of traumatising living in Thessalonika, Cicero had developed a powerful – and entirely reasonable – grudge against Clodius and began leaning hard into violently insulting him and his family at any opportunity. His favourite rumour to spread was that Clodius slept with his sisters, a rumour that had been started by the husband of the other Clodia. Lucius Lucullus, a great politician and general in his own right, married the youngest of Clodius's sisters and then divorced her, allegedly swearing an oath that he had caught his wife in bed with her brother.[5] Cicero liked to extend this accusation into incest with all his sisters because it damaged everyone's reputation that bit more and that made Cicero happy. Practically every extant speech given by Cicero in the year after his return from exile makes a snide reference about Clodius taking his sister's virginities or committing adulteries with them. Although Clodia Metelli is only referenced personally once with another mention of her 'flaming eyes', the repeated accusation immediately casts a shadow over her reputation in Rome.[6] And then, in 56 BCE, Cicero's favourite protégé found himself accused of attempted murder by none other than Clodia Metelli and, for her, all hell broke loose.

The protégé was Marcus Caelius Rufus, an Equestrian who had studied under Cicero and Crassus in his youth and then, once emancipated and living by himself, took up prosecuting people for attention. Probably in his twenties in 56 BCE, Caelius lived next door to Clodia on the Palatine Hill. Clodia was now a mid-thirties widowed mother of one and, allegedly, she and Caelius started an affair which ended badly enough to wind up in court. In what specific way it ended badly depends on who you want to believe. According to Clodia, as filtered through Cicero's defence speech, Caelius borrowed enormous sums of money from her in order to pay to have an Alexandrian diplomat murdered and then got cold feet. When she tried to recall her loan and end the relationship, he attempted to murder her instead. She claimed that Caelius bribed enslaved people within her household to give her poison, bought an enslaved person and tested the poison on that person to ensure it worked (a part of the whole affair that is *seriously* overlooked in my opinion), and that her friends had caught him in the very act of handing over said poison by staging an elaborate sting operation in a bathhouse. In Clodia's version

of events, she admitted to being party to some extra-judicial executions of foreign politicians but she also presented herself equally as a victim of Caelius's greed and murderous intentions. In order to crush the case against his protégé, Cicero decided to crush the credibility of the accuser. And so he developed a character so powerful and alluring that it obliterated the image of Clodia as a political operator and replaced her with the Palatine Medea.

In Greek myth, Medea is a monstrous and pitiable figure, a demigoddess best known from Euripides' tragedy. This play depicts the end of Medea's mortal life and the end of her marriage. In Euripides' telling, Medea ran away from her father, her homeland and her life as a princess to marry the hero Jason. At the start of the play, she has spent ten years living in Corinth, being a good wife to Jason, raising two children and having the Argonauts round for dinner. She is thus both bereft and (rightly) furious when Jason leaves her and the kids for a younger woman in Act I. In her blind rage and agony, Medea murders Jason's new wife (with a poisoned dress, a deliciously bizarre weapon) and then, to ensure that her husband experiences the most intense suffering, cuts the throats of their children. 'Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned/Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned', wrote William Congreve, and Medea's scorched-earth approach to revenge embodied the scorned woman blazing with an immortal anger that would stop at nothing to hurt those who hurt her. And this is the model that Cicero drew upon to destroy Clodia.

Cicero's version of Caelius and Clodia's affair painted Clodia as a literal prostitute who used her money and beautiful houses, gardens and estates to lure young men into her sphere, defile them and then cast them aside. In his account, Clodia spied the young, handsome man moving in next door and decided to make him her next victim. She did her best to seduce him and Caelius either briefly fell for her and then regretted it or rebuffed her entirely (the story changes from paragraph to paragraph because consistency of narrative was not Cicero's forte). Either way, he eventually rejected her and she simply could not handle rejection. In a rage fuelled by entitlement, and stoked by the sheer handsomeness of Caelius, 'sick at heart and wounded by savage love', Cicero claims, Clodia invented this whole story about gold and murders and corruption and set up the whole court case just to make Caelius suffer.[7] The Medea of the Palatine.

This set-up alone conjures an irresistible image of a blazing seductress and Cicero didn't stop there. He created an overwhelming picture of a woman utterly depraved by luxury to the extent that she had seduced even her own brother. In this version of events, it is not Clodius who defiled his sisters but his whore sister who enticed him along with every other man she had ever looked at. This section includes the best joke he ever wrote though, when he called Clodius her 'husband … sorry I mean brother'. Jokes were not his strength. Cicero took almost every element of Clodia's life and held it up as an example of unbridled sexual and moral degeneracy. Owning gardens with swimming pools on the banks of the Tiber became an attempt to lure young men into her web of sex. Giving gifts to young men or supporting their political careers became using her money to take advantage of poor young boys. Having dinner with people became working in a brothel, while the clothes she wore he described as barely better than being naked. Especially as she had those seductive flaming eyes.[8] He claimed that she owned and displayed a statue of Venus in her home decorated like a Christmas tree with trophies taken from all her lovers. He implied that the only way she was able to set up the sting that caught Caelius was to have sex with the low-class bath attendant. He made jokes that she was so cheap she would have sex with anyone for copper pennies.

Worst of all, as far as Cicero was concerned, she owned a villa in Baiae, a resort town on the Gulf of Naples by the sea. Cicero described Baiae as though it were a combination of a stag party in Magaluf, Sodom and a child pornography ring. He was forced by reality to admit that he himself had been to Baiae – to soak in the baths, as an old man, for his agonies – but claimed to be appalled and shocked by such goings-on as boat parties and beach parties and – gasp – dinner parties! He became very dainty when describing what actually happened at her parties lest he accidentally damaged the reputation of his client who attended them, although he outright called Clodia a whore repeatedly, and called her 'a slut living the lifestyle of a prostitute' right in the middle of the Forum.[9] But he wink-wink-nudge-nudged his way through the idea that *everyone* knew that Baiae was a depraved place of nudity, perversion, sun, sea and deviant sex.

Not satisfied with painting this image of a luxurious, wasteful hussy who will need to be buried in a Y-shaped coffin, he then repeatedly implied that she murdered her husband. 'Clodia would be wiser not to mention quick-acting poisons', he quipped towards the end of a long lament about Metellus's death, killed by the 'sudden violence of a crime'.[10] According to a later author, Quintilian, who wrote about a century after these events, Caelius took to calling Clodia a cheap Clytemnestra in reference to the queen of Greek tragedy who, along with her boyfriend, murdered her husband Agamemnon when he returned from the Trojan War.† Finally, after eight thousand (Latin) words, Cicero concluded on a high by demanding that the jury not sacrifice a nice young man on the altar of the lusts of a vile woman and her brother-husband. That is not me paraphrasing. That is exactly what he says. Some things never change.

The whole of Cicero's speech is an hour and a half of genuinely breath-taking misdirection and misogyny and it created the character of 'Clodia', the wild child of Late Republican Rome.‡ The character was largely drawn from the monstrous women of Greek tragedy and some stock figures from Roman comedy but it worked because, for all his many personality flaws, Cicero was a genius. The jury acquitted Caelius and he went on to become a Senator and win elections to magistracies and remain friends with Cicero for the rest of their lives. He wrote lots of letters to Cicero keeping him updated with all the gossip in Rome when Cicero was made governor of Sicily, and he comes across as a bouncy Labrador of a man who writes with a genuine charm and beguiling lack of pomposity. Just a shame he was a prick. He died in 48 BCE in battle against Julius Caesar's troops. Clodia, on the other hand, was left with this speech staining her reputation forever. If she *had* started an affair with Caelius, she may have powerfully regretted it by the time Cicero had done speaking. He had turned her perfectly normal activities as a rich, fairly young, politically active widow who liked handsome boys into a full character assassination dishonouring her and her family.

Cicero's characterisation of Clodia in the Caelius speech would be enough to make her the subject of at least one three-star historical novel, but what propels Clodia from three-star novel to the stratosphere is her identification with Catullus's Lesbia. Catullus represented what Cicero sneeringly called 'new poetry' (you have to say it in the way that reactionaries say 'modern art'). New poetry means poems that are short and elegant and about feelings, rather than long and epic and about battles, and Catullus was at the forefront of the movement. One hundred and sixteen of his poems survive, most of them short, punchy and fantastically rude. My personal favourite verse of his is the one he wrote about Julius Caesar, demonstrating that absolutely no one could predict where Caesar was going to end up. It's very short and goes, in very loose translation: 'I do not wish to please you,

Caesar, nor even know what you look like.'[11] The guts on Catullus. He also wrote a poem that begins: 'I will bugger and facefuck you, you sodomite Aurelius and pervert Furius'.[12] That's one hell of an opener and definitely doesn't fit into the earlier canon of Roman poetry which is largely not about revenge raping other men. In amongst these are at least twenty-five poems chronicling the ups and downs of his relationship with a woman he calls Lesbia, a married woman whose brother he calls Lesbius Pulcher and who is generally believed to be Clodia Metelli, at least partly because his depiction of Lesbia seemingly so neatly tallies with Cicero's depiction of Clodia.[13]

In brief, Catullus's poems chart a tumultuous affair and depict Lesbia alternately as a sweet girl weeping over the death of her beloved pet sparrow, the sexiest woman in the world, a woman he physically cannot stop kissing, the most loved woman on earth, a cheap shallow tart, a bitch he never fancied anyway, a screeching harridan who is only pretending to be over him, the only woman he will ever love, and – sigh – a working prostitute who shags three hundred men at a time on street corners and has never felt love. Any femme-presenting person who has ever been on a dating app will recognise this rollercoaster of feelings veering violently from 'I am completely obsessed with you and want to kiss you forever' in poem seven to 'You'll be sorry because no one will ever love you and you're not even pretty' in poem eight. The image of his Lesbia as a sexually voracious woman who whispers sweet nothings into his ear about how she wants to marry him one minute (poem seventy) and then hurts his feelings by sleeping with other men the next (eleven, fifty-eight, ninety-one) appears on the surface to be exactly what Cicero described: a depraved slut who lures in men and then crushes them.

However, when we look closely, there were differences. Cicero describes a woman who uses her wealth, social standing and big houses to lure younger, poorer and more vulnerable men into a web of sexual depravity and then loses her mind if they reject her. Catullus, on the other hand, describes a married woman who carries on several romantic love affairs with men who woo her, adore her and are her social and intellectual equals and even friends.[14] Catullus and Lesbia spit insults at one another and love one another. For all Catullus's kvetching about Lesbia sleeping with Rufuses and Gelliuses, he's happy to write poems about all the other women and men that he is also sleeping with. Catullus wrote seven poems about a young man he called Juventius who he seems to have spent half his time kissing, whether Juventius wanted him to or not.[15] In another, he describes shagging a girl called Ipsithilla nine times in a single afternoon. If Lesbia wrote poems which survived, we might find as many about her sadness and fury at Catullus's betrayals of their supposedly great love as he wrote.

The most significant difference between Cicero's Clodia and Catullus's Lesbia is the social scene they are shown being a part of. In Cicero's version, Clodia is a lone wolf with only her brother beside her, a uniquely appalling character within an otherwise conservative set, all of whom are expected to be on Cicero's side. Catullus's Lesbia, on the other hand, is one of many rich, well-educated and louche men, women and people beyond the binary all bonking one another and having a very lovely time. And writing poems about it. A kind of Roman Bloomsbury Group, where Clodia is our Virginia Woolf and Catullus is our Lytton Strachey, rejecting the bourgeois morality of Cicero and their dads, and revelling in pleasure and feelings and art. A common quip about the Bloomsbury set is that 'they lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles',[16] and this idea of rakish young(ish) people who are flamboyant, decadent, promiscuous and rebellious enough to upset their parents but rich enough to never suffer a consequence fits the

social scene described by Catullus. And, just as the Bloomsbury Group was shattered by world wars, Clodia's New Women and Catullus's New Poets would not survive the clashes between Caesar and Pompey.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: no one is just one story. But Clodia, amazingly, is perhaps the best documented woman to have lived in the whole Roman Republic. We have more sources describing a version of Clodia than we do Cleopatra. Because each of the sources we have on Clodia belongs to a different genre, each shows us a completely different perspective on her. None of these perspectives is complete, but equally none of them is necessarily wrong either. Maybe the real Clodia, the woman who loved her horrible brother even though no one else did, the woman who had periods every month and got pregnant and went through labour and raised a daughter; maybe she did invite young men to sexy beach parties in Baiae and maybe she did shag pretty boys in dirty taverns for fun and maybe she did stomp hard on Catullus's heart and cry over her sparrow and then go to dinner with Atticus and talk to him about the upcoming elections for praetor and Caesar's ambitions and the wars in Spain. All those things can be true about one person because the great thing about people is that we contain multitudes.

Through Clodia and her many appearances in Late Republican texts, we are shown a whole new Rome. The Rome of the Early and Middle Republics is seen mostly through histories and annals focusing on the traditional subjects of masculine public life and so they depict a Rome which is martial, religious and fairly staid. That's the story Romans wanted to tell about themselves. But when we are able to break away from the histories and read the letters and speeches and poems, women (and gender non-conforming people and queer lives; both are depicted in Catullus's work) burst into Roman life in comparatively glorious Technicolor and it is wonderful. These lives and these colours always existed in Rome. In the Late Republic, these are the lives that upset conservatives like Livy so much that he wrote his history full of lessons about proper gender presentation and correct morals, where good women don't drink wine and only cis-het people exist, like a furious newspaper columnist. But queer and decadent lives certainly did exist in Rome and here they are in the letters and poems for us to enjoy.

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† The Second Foundation, as it is often called, occurred because the Senate had handed power temporarily to a council of ten men (the Decemvirate) who were charged with codifying Roman law. Having done so, they became reluctant to give their power up and, largely led by Appius Claudius, just kept ruling. This caused some problems but who knows what would have happened if Appius hadn't gotten carried away in a very familiar manner.

Specifically, Appius became infatuated with the teenage daughter of a friend and tried to marry her. Her name was Verginia. Verginia's father turned Appius down, which he was not expecting and took badly. In a fit of vengeful desire, Appius enacted a complex plot in which he kidnapped Verginia off the streets and then claimed in court that she was not a free girl but a runaway slave. He bribed the courts to have Verginia's status changed to that of slave and then moved to take her home where he planned to have his vile way with her. Verginia's father, in a move considered to be heroic in the sources, stabbed his daughter to death in public to save her from Appius's violation. This scandal reminded everyone of Lucretia, prompted huge riots and ended the Decemvirate. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 3.33–57.

† During the many hundreds of years since the first Census under Servius Tullius, inflation, the introduction of silver coins and the need to use copper and bronze in the ever-expanding Roman war machine had caused the *as* to depreciate to nothingness. In 269 CE, the Romans introduced new coins to their economy: the *denarius* and the *sestertius*. A *denarius*, as its

name suggests, was worth ten copper *asses*, while a *sestertius* was worth 2.5. The *sestertius* became the most common coin. By the Late Republic, *asses* were tiny coins worth very little in comparison to the gold and silver currency which dominated a much larger economy. Bowen, 1951.

† In Clytemnestra's defence, Agamemnon had murdered their daughter and then pissed off to war for a full decade. Quint. *Inst.* 8.6.53.

‡ I know it's that long because I just got mesmerised watching a man called Greg (fiantlapides) perform the entire thing in Latin on YouTube.

Turia

46 BCE

The Survivor

If you were a traveller arriving in Rome at any point between 8 BCE and maybe 400 CE, as you rode along the Via Appia, you would have passed – among the hundreds of tombs lining the roads – one particularly enormous memorial. Two slabs of pristine Italian marble stood side by side, each over two-and-a-half metres tall and almost a metre wide (8.75ft x 2.75ft), looming like Stanley Kubrick's monoliths, each densely covered with text. The immense marble headstones preserved the story of the life of a woman, the wife of the man who commissioned them to 'consecrate [her] to immortality, to be remembered forever'. For him and for all the passers-by who read his words chiselled into the huge, unmoving rock, it must have seemed impossible for her memorial ever to be lost. Unfortunately for them, and for anyone else who ever attempted to immortalise themselves, they were wrong. In the fourth century CE, the memorial was smashed up and doled out across the city by Christian builders who wanted to access the good stone that was going to waste standing in fields. Over the intervening centuries, fragments of this memorial were found in Christian catacombs, plastered into the walls of abbeys, lying at the bottom of pits and holding up walls. All in all, seven fragments of the memorial have been discovered, and reconstructed into the longest private Latin inscription ever found.[1] It tells the story of one woman's life in remarkable and intimate detail.

The focus of this inscription is known as Turia. She lived during the Late Republic with all its wars and upheaval and social change, and she was the complete opposite of Clodia. While Clodia enjoyed her life as a key member of the *populares*, undermining the conventional, traditional *mores* of Roman life, Turia represents the conservative, *optimate* set. The twin set and pearls and temperance set. The friends of Cicero who want only the *best* of men to rule and a return to *proper* Roman values. The ones who lost.[†]

We know an astonishing amount about Turia's life from her epitaph. We know that she came of age during the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey and that her husband fought on Pompey's losing side. They both survived to live through Caesar's assassination, the rise of Octavian, the creation of the Triumvirate and the collapse again into civil war between Octavian and Antony. She survived massacres, proscriptions, home invasions, legal attacks, murder trials and an infertility which nearly broke her, but hers is a rarely heard perspective. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, her book about Soviet women who fought in World War Two, Svetlana Alexievich wrote,

> when women speak [about war], they have nothing or almost nothing of what we are used to reading and hearing about: How certain people heroically killed other people and won. Or lost. What equipment there was and what generals. Women's stories are different and about different things … There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanely human things.[2]

That is what Turia's story is. Of course, Turia did not write her own story – that would be too much to ask – and so we are left with a man's version of her story, but even then, we get a very personal, surprisingly emotional story of a woman humanly surviving the inhumane.

The opening twenty lines of Turia's memorial are lost. The fragment containing them is presumably holding up a basement somewhere or was part of a long-lost church. Thus, we have lost anything her husband wrote about her family or origins. And both their names, infuriatingly. Thus, when we meet Turia for the first time, it is abruptly. She is young, engaged and completely alone in Rome and we can make an educated stab that she was in her late teens.[3] Her betrothed, who we will be calling Lucretius because everyone does, was in Macedonia while her only sister (name unknown) and brother-in-law (Cluvius) were in Africa. The year was 49 BCE, and the world was being ripped apart by the war Caesar started when he crossed the Rubicon. Both Lucretius and Cluvius supported Pompey and the Senate, so Lucretius followed the great man to Macedonia when Caesar started tearing up Italy, destroying Lucretius and Turia's domestic plans in several ways. Firstly, Caesar took Lucretius away from his home in Rome and fired him into the centre of a war for the soul of the empire, so he couldn't marry his fiancée right away. Secondly, in the roiling, bloody chaos engulfing Italy in Caesar's wake, someone brutally murdered both of Turia's parents in their country villa.

Personally, in such a situation, I would lie down and cry for perhaps the next decade but Turia, her husband makes clear, was not like other girls. Despite being in the middle of a war zone, with most of the officials at Rome somewhat distracted, Turia immediately took it upon herself to identify and bring the killers to justice. And she succeeded. Lucretius, disappointingly for us true crime fans, doesn't specify who the perpetrators of the murder were or precisely how Turia took her revenge. Theodor Mommsen, who put together the first edition of Turia's epitaph, in an uncharacteristic flight of imaginative fancy, confidently and baselessly declared that the killers were people enslaved by the family. He imagined that the enslaved people took advantage of the fog of war to slaughter their enslavers, revealing either Mommsen's odd revenge fantasy or his baffling belief that enslaved people were inherently untrustworthy.[4] Either way, he pulled it from thin air, he produced no evidence to support it and it also didn't happen. There are many examples from the decades around the civil wars of families being annihilated in their country homes by a variety of different perpetrators. Gangs of bandits roamed the countryside, forcing travellers to have armed guards as they travelled from Rome to Campania, and bands of men came together for violence both political and personal. In 69 BCE, Cicero had litigated a case in which one man had coveted his neighbour's field to such an extent that he had sent in a group of armed enslaved men to slaughter every living thing on his neighbour's property and burn his house down.[5] Such things happened during peace time, so war can only have been worse. I suspect that the murderers were not a roving gang of strangers or people Turia claimed as property because Lucretius specifically references her 'insistent demands' in pursuit of justice, suggesting to me a legal route was taken against known, free perpetrators.[6]

In the process of valiantly fighting to have her parents' murderers caught and dealt with by the relevant authorities, Turia accidentally drew attention to herself and her status as a young, single woman in Rome without living parents, and apparently she looked like an opportunity to some unscrupulous rogues. No sooner had she sat down to recover from the murder she just solved than she was hauled back into court by some random strangers who claimed that they were her relatives,

that she belonged under their legal guardianship and that they – not she – should inherit all of her father's property. The audacity of the attempt is amazing, as they clearly thought that they could get away with making some very bold claims and brazenly steal all of Turia's inheritance. Turia was a rich woman, properly and enormously rich, but without a father or a husband she looked from the outside to be completely unprotected. Women could not give speeches in court. They could not sign contracts or act, legally, as adults. As I mentioned before, Roman law kept aristocratic women as legal minors, under the 'protection' of a guardian. Women without a husband or father were presumed to be an easy target as scammers assumed that these women's unrelated guardians would not work hard in their defence. It's anyone's guess how often such scams worked out for the scammers but it is horrifying that it could work at all. An aristocratic woman could end up completely at the mercy of strangers claiming to be from her extended family – her *gens* – and without any access to her own property or freedom. A *gens* is an ancient and mostly Patrician thing; it most accurately translates to clan and broadly has the same connotation of a sprawling, loosely related group of people who all used the same surname and claimed descent from the same ancient, Patrician, sometimes divine ancestor. The Julii were a *gens*, for example, claiming descent from Venus. The Claudii were a *gens.* Families, as smaller units, existed within the wider clan. It appears that what happened is that distant relatives with the same surname as Turia decided that they would and could take control of her life and property. Turia looked that horror right in the eyes and said no thank you. She went back to court, alone, and resisted their every claim ferociously. 'It was your firm decision that you would defend your father's written word', says Lucretius in his eulogy and it seems that Turia so obstinately rejected her newfound 'family' and their every attempt to take over her life that they eventually simply backed off and went to find a softer target.

Through both these trials in the aftermath of her parents' deaths, playing out against the backdrop of a civil war, Turia demonstrated impressive persistence, perseverance and courage. These incidents alone would provide the basis for a decent memoir. But the wars were not yet over and the man she loved could not escape them.

In 48 BCE, Turia moved in with her future mother-in-law, Lucretius's mother, in order to protect both her modesty and reputation and to demonstrate her conservative dedication to her betrothed. The house they appeared to be living in belonged to Lucretius who had bought it in 52 BCE in an auction following the exile of the previous owner. That previous owner was the politician Milo, who had been exiled for brutally murdering Publius Clodius Pulcher, Clodia's brother, in a gang fight on the Appian Way. The murder and the trial had caused chaos in Rome but Milo maintained a significant following, including Cicero's little protégé Marcus Caelius Rufus. As soon as Caesar left Italy to fight Pompey in Macedonia, Milo and Caelius had *carpe*-d the *diem* and attempted to lead a rebellion in Italy. Both were put down by legions Caesar left behind but not before causing a lot of trouble.

Among those troubles was an attempt to reclaim Milo's house on the Palatine. As Turia and Lucretius's mother were living in the house alone, they were again seen as easy prey and a mob of Milo's supporters showed up in the middle of the night with weapons. It's incredibly depressing how often Turia was targeted by people who saw a woman without a man and decided to take advantage of a perceived weakness, because the belief that a solo woman is a pathetic little creature to be abused and taken advantage of was apparently pervasive in war-torn Rome. Turia had to fight back with every weapon at her disposal simply to survive,

including fighting with real weapons. Previous attacks on the house by Milo's enemies had involved 'men with shields and drawn swords, and others with lighted firebrands' while another had to be 'seen off with arrows'.[7] This was war very literally on Turia's doorstep, and she once again survived.

Now that Turia had secured justice for her father, her own inheritance and security and her home, all she needed was her fiancé back so that she could marry him and have kids and be in love. Because Turia and Lucretius were, according to Lucretius, very much in love. The primary obstacle at the time was that Lucretius had chosen the losing side in the civil war. Caesar beat Pompey in August 48 BCE and Ptolemy XIII assassinated the big man a month later in Egypt. Although the war went on, the astute knew that Caesar had functionally won. Lucretius and Turia were astute and so Lucretius left the troops and tried to make his way back to Italy. Turia worked tirelessly to get him home. She sent him money and food and enslaved people to help him. When she couldn't send cash, she sent her own jewellery for him to sell and maintain 'a dignified way of living' during his escape.[8] I do find this rich person shit fairly hilarious. Heaven forfend that a Senator has to sleep in a subpar bed while fleeing for his life! But Turia understood Lucretius's delicate needs better than I and so she stripped off her pearl earrings to make his life a little easier.

She also worked hard behind the scenes to get messages to Julius Caesar himself via his friends and family and managed to contact him and beg for her fiancé to be pardoned. Caesar often prided himself on his clemency, and his forgiveness of many of those who fought with Pompey is often brought up in political histories of Rome because one of the men he pardoned was the Brutus of '*et tu, Brute*' fame. Thousands of men were able to go home because Caesar had a lenient streak, were able to see their wives and children again, kiss their mothers and meet their grandbabies, and run into their houses and finally marry their true love as Lucretius was, thanks to Caesar's soft heart and Turia's determination.

A line that is passed over in many analyses of Turia's memorial (known, by the way, as the *Laudatio Turiae*) comes at the end of the section describing her work to protect Lucretius and bring him back to Rome. It says Turia showed 'great ingenuity in deceiving the guards posted by our adversaries', implying that Lucretius's return to Rome was not a smooth one and that it was fraught with assassins and enemies who wanted him dead. Turia apparently deceived these guards – how? What? Tell me more! – and allowed Lucretius to get home safely, meaning that she put herself directly in the line of danger to protect a man she wasn't even married to yet. That line has the plot of a whole movie in it, but also gives us a little glimpse at how much violence the wars brought to Rome. It is so easy in political histories to slide over ordinary lives and the effects of the civil wars because there is simply so much politics to talk about. Just really so much politics. And the little lives of guys who were consul once and never invaded Rome or married a queen are just not as interesting as the politics stuff, except to me. And hopefully you. These guys like Lucretius lived for weeks wondering if they could ever safely go home and see their families again, and some were not allowed to return. Some were exiled or executed by Caesar. Some had the relief of a pardon and trekked grimly home through their ravaged empire and ravaged countryside to arrive in the city only to be slaughtered on their own doorstep by personal enemies, assassins and people looking for revenge. Each of these left someone – a mother, a son, a father, a wife – weeping over their corpse. Lucretius was one of the lucky ones, thanks to the intervention of his fiancée.

With 48 BCE coming to an end Turia had thus far lived through a murder mystery, a legal thriller, a home invasion horror movie and a long saga about a man getting home against all the odds while being chased by hired killers (in my head, this guy is played by Gerard Butler but do feel free to cast your own fantasy Lucretius and Turia). Finally – finally – her betrothed was home and they could get married. One of my favourite things about the story of Turia is that, although it contains several different genres of tale even within the same paragraph, above all it is a love story. Historians generally agree that Lucretius originally delivered the text of the *Laudatio Turiae* as a eulogy at Turia's funeral, partly because it is so overtly emotional. You can feel Lucretius's heartbreak and grief and love rolling out of his words. The pair remained married for forty-one years, not including their years of betrothal, enduring a great many personal and professional trials, and at the end of her life he spoke about her with such care and admiration and respect that it breaks my heart. And then, because that wasn't enough for him, he spent an absolute *fortune* on blocks of marble that could blot out the sun so that he could immortalise his love for her. And, man, he loved her. Towards the end of the *Laudatio* he wrote:

> Along with you, I have lost the tranquillity of my existence … A natural sorrow has snatched away my power of self-control. I am overwhelmed with sadness.[9]

He specifically loves her for the things she did. He loves her wise advice and good opinions, her courage and strength and wits.

We don't have Turia's perspective, for several obvious reasons, but from her deeds as described by Lucretius I feel pretty comfortable saying that he at least thought she adored him as he adored her. She certainly acted like she did. Because their troubles absolutely did not end when this civil war finally came to a close. Just a couple of years after Caesar made himself dictator for life in Rome and started acting in a highly stressful manner, violence returned to the imperial capital and the killings kicked off again. Once again, Lucretius chose the losing side. He seems to have been a staunch *optimate* and to have opposed the populism of Caesar. The lines concerning Caesar's death and the rise of Octavian are missing, so we could speculate wildly if we wanted and place Lucretius in the cabal of men who conspired to kill Caesar. That would be pure imagination though, and I can't condone that. What is sure is that once Octavian appeared in Rome with his surprise illegal personal army and kickstarted another civil war against Brutus and Cassius, Lucretius openly sided with Caesar's assassins so when their cause went tits up, Turia had to rescue her husband from his own bad ideas again.

For those who don't follow Late Republican politics, this is what happened in brief: in 45 BCE Caesar was assassinated during a Senate meeting by Brutus, Cassius and a gang of Senators. Following his death, his will revealed that he had adopted his great-nephew, a sickly teenager called Octavian. This didn't worry people much because he was, as I said, a sickly teenager, but Octavian turned out to be genuinely terrifying. He rolled up in Rome, changed his name to Julius Caesar, allied with Mark Antony and forced everyone to join in a civil war to avenge his 'father's' assassination. In order to prosecute this war without anything even vaguely approaching a pesky democracy, he, Mark Antony and a very rich guy called Lepidus formally carved up the empire and began ruling as an official entity known as the Triumvirate in 44 BCE. Their rule was a reign of terror, beginning with the publication of a list of 142 men whom they considered to have worked against

them and thus to have worked against the Republic. These men, including Cicero, were now proscribed. To be proscribed was to become prey. The Triumvirs, as they called themselves, issued a decree that anyone who killed or turned in the men listed as enemies of the state would receive a hefty reward. Enslaved people who snitched on their enslavers received their freedom. Anyone could enter and search their property and cause as much damage as they wanted. The proscribed were suddenly non-people and everyone in the empire was both obligated and incentivised to murder them on the spot. A few days later, delighted by the success of the first, the Triumvirs released a second roster of a further 150 proscribed names. Lucretius's name appeared on one of these lists.

The Roman historian Appian dedicates a good chunk of his history of the civil wars to telling the stories of the proscribed and the overall atmosphere he describes is one of sheer horror. *The Purge* began playing out across Italy and throughout Rome. Terror engulfed the city because it was not just the proscribed who were murdered. Anyone could be killed by anyone and, with a bit of effort, their names could be added to the lists of the proscribed after the fact. If that was even necessary. Appian says that people began working out whether a murder was part of the proscriptions by whether the head was attached to corpses when they were discovered.[10] In order to claim the Triumvirs' reward, the head of the proscribed had to be presented (which is how Cicero ended up with hairpins stuck in his tongue by Antony's wife Fulvia) but those who were killed out of personal enmity or for fun and profit usually had their heads still attached. The proscribed all reacted with panic and dread. Some tried to run as far and as fast as they could, or to hide. Some immediately took their own lives to escape the horror and die with dignity. Some died fighting while mobs stormed their houses, others died begging on their knees. Statius the Samnite gave away all his property and freed all the people he enslaved, then burned himself alive in his own house. Aponius – I like this one – managed to get away and disguise himself safely but got so fed up with being poor, or 'unable to endure the meanness of his mode of existence' as Appian says, he turned himself in after a few weeks. The man would literally rather be dead than poor.[11]

The stories go on and on. People disguised themselves as enslaved people and corpses, they hid in chimneys and holes in the ground and caves in the mountains. Some were betrayed by those closest to them, some were protected. A lot of enslaved people took the opportunity to get their own back and gain their freedom at the same time, genuinely shocking their clueless Roman enslavers. The stories offer a relentless litany of slaughter and agony and among them appears the story of a wife who stood by her husband and helped him. This is the story of Lucretius, whom Theodor Mommsen identified as being the author and subject of the *Laudatio* because the story Appian tells has some notable similarities to the tale of bravery and wits told in the *Laudatio*.

The *Laudatio* version goes like this: Lucretius found himself on the proscriptions list and panicked. He describes himself as imprudent, overbold and rash, and in a hurry to do something silly that would only court danger. Turia, however, remained calm and formulated a plan to conceal him. She found him a safe hiding place and forced him in there. She recruited her sister and brother-in-law Cluvius to help her, at great personal risk because concealing fugitives was also punishable with death. And she kept him in hiding until she could sort the situation out, and we'll get to that in a minute. The tale told by Appian says that Lucretius initially fled into the countryside with two enslaved men. When they ran out of food – giving you a bit of an idea of how long this nightmare went on for – he

attempted to return to his unnamed wife by hiding in a litter 'disguised' as a sick person. If this Lucretius was the author of the *Laudatio*, I think we can see why he appreciated Turia so much. He was never getting a MacArthur grant for cunning plans, was he? Along the way, one of his two enslaved companions broke his leg so Lucretius abandoned him. Upon arriving at the city gates, he and his one remaining enslaved aide hid in a tomb overnight to avoid soldiers patrolling the city walls. During that night, a band of grave robbers arrived to loot the tomb they were hiding in (at which point I imagine everyone was feeling like the gods were really against them). The enslaved guy, either desperate to get away from Lucretius or acting with remarkable loyalty, allowed Lucretius to swap clothes with him and then distracted the tomb raiders so that Lucretius could escape. He snuck into the city and made it home. There, his wife hid him inside a concealed attic for several weeks until his name was removed from the proscriptions list.[12] You can see how Mommsen made the connection between this ludicrous display of very bad plans and the author of the *Laudatio*'s account of rash ideas and running into danger.

A second version of Appian's Lucretius story exists in Valerius Maximus's very fun book of moral anecdotes for the emperor Tiberius. I've written before that I can't help but be inspired by a man who has the gall to write a moral handbook for an actual emperor and I stand by it. May we all have that energy in our lives. One of the anecdotes he records tells of the exemplary loyalty of one wife during the proscriptions: Turia, the wife of Lucretius. This version omits the part about Lucretius wandering around like a twat and hiding in tombs, but skips directly to Turia hiding him in the roof of their house and employing a single enslaved girl to help her keep him alive.[13] It is from this account that the wife of the *Laudatio* has taken her name.

Back to the *Laudatio*, where Turia concealed her husband for a long time, possibly in an attic. Turia was not a woman who sat about in a crisis and so she set to work repeating her acts of diplomacy with those in power. She reached out to Octavian and begged and promised and negotiated her husband's name off the proscriptions list. The exact lines describing this are lost but somehow she persuaded Octavian to erase Lucretius's name and restore his right as a citizen to not be murdered in his bed for financial reward. Her ability to do this suggests either that she was a powerful negotiator or that Lucretius was a very low-level *optimate*. This proved to be, however, only the first barrier to freedom. The second, and much more difficult to surmount, came in the form of everyone's least favourite Triumvir, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. The Triumvirate had carved up the empire into personal dominions, but Italy technically remained in their joint control as three-way dictators, which is why Octavian could unilaterally pardon someone in Rome. At the precise time of the proscriptions, though, Lepidus was the only Triumvir actually in Rome and he was already feeling squeezed out by his fellow tyrants. So when Turia turned up on his doorstep with a letter from that irritating whippersnapper Octavian saying that he had independently taken a name off the proscriptions list, Lepidus got in a huff and just refused to acknowledge it. He wouldn't even meet with Turia. A lesser woman might have despaired at the intransigence of the Triumvir who, for all that we write him off as useless now, was astonishingly powerful in 44 BCE. But Turia just kept going. She showed up at a public meeting Lepidus held in the middle of the Forum, pushed through the crowds and flung herself prostrate at his feet while declaring that Octavian had allowed Lucretius's recall. Lepidus ordered his guards to get her out of there. She was making a scene. It was embarrassing him. But Turia, in the style of all good peaceful protesters, wouldn't be moved easily. The guards, in full view of Lepidus

and the whole of Rome, beat her and kicked her as she lay prostrate, then they lifted her up and brutally carried her away. ‘Like a slave’ says Lucretius because Romans are horrible.

His point is that Romans were not accustomed to seeing women like Turia beaten and manhandled. Free-born, upper-class woman of wealth and significant social cachet were usually treated with respect and deference. Turia being hauled bodily out of the Forum while she begged loudly for the life of her husband made people uncomfortable and it made Lepidus look bloody terrible, like a tyrant. It also worked, and Turia shamed Lepidus into accepting Octavian’s decree and allowing Lucretius his freedom. Lucretius writes that the scene contributed to Lepidus’s downfall, which feels like an overstatement – Lepidus stuck around until 36 BCE – but I appreciate that Lucretius believed his wife had that effect on the world.

Gradually, in the aftermath of the proscriptions, Rome recovered. Slowly, and painfully, and through more seemingly interminable civil wars, political murders and the entire restructuring of the Republic. But finally, in 29 BCE, Octavian was the last man standing and he closed the Gates of Janus Quirinus to officially end the civil wars and start the Pax Romana. Turia and Lucretius were still together, largely unharmed, and more sure than ever of their love for one another. A life of peace could start where they focused on managing their vast properties and having lots of little babies. But the years started coming and they didn’t stop coming and every single month Turia bled on cue and every single period was another shattering heartbreak. The couple were infertile.

To describe public conversation by men about non-theoretical infertility in Rome as being rare as an Alpha Black Lotus is to understate its rarity. This is largely because Romans saw infertility as an exclusively female problem, as is made clear by the way that Lucretius writes about theirs. Only Turia had to take steps, described by Lucretius as ‘remarkable and praiseworthy’, to resolve the problem. Her actions certainly involved a lot of praying and making offerings to various gods but may also have included some of the remedies described by natural historians like everyone’s favourite Pliny the Elder. Cures for infertility listed by Pliny include wearing a plant named a Squirting Cucumber as a necklace. Watching videos of the squirting cucumber has made me weep with laughter while writing this so I highly recommend you do that because it really is aptly named. Other remedies, selected purely for their horror factor, include: inserting a pessary made of a new-born baby’s first poo, aka the green-black meconium; eating the eye of a hyena with liquorice and dill; rubbing a mixture of bull bile, serpent fat, verdigris and honey on the genitals before sex; injecting goat bile; drinking five to seven earthworms and doing something unstated with the urine of a eunuch.[14] You can see why Turia’s husband was impressed with her efforts. None of them worked. I know it won’t shock you that rubbing honey and bile on your vag does nothing but invite yeast infections, but this continued failure dismayed and hurt Turia. She was, in Lucretius’s telling, badly injured by what she perceived as her barrenness (a vile term) but also very distressed that she had been unable to give Lucretius the children he wanted.

So distressed was Turia that she came up with a characteristically bold solution to the problem. Fully aware that the stated *raison d’être* of Roman marriage was *liberorum procreandorum causa* – for the production of legitimate heirs – she considered a child-free marriage to be a problem and came up with a solution drawn straight from Roman myth. She presented a full-formed proposal to her husband: she would divorce him and would help him find a new, fertile wife. This wife would be able to provide him with the legitimate heirs he desired and

deserved, but would have to be happy with the old wife sticking around. Because Turia planned to stay legally tied to Lucretius through her property, left in Lucretius's control, and by still living in the house. She offered to raise the children as though they were her own and take on 'the duties and loyalties of a sister and mother-in-law'.[15]

In the history books, old Republican men and women behaved like this all the time; some guy binning off his wife for a woman who can provide him with heirs is a disturbingly common anecdote in Roman history. Carvilius Ruga garnered centuries' worth of praise for divorcing his infertile wife even though he loved her in the 220s BCE, and more recently, in 90 BCE, Sulla had dumped his wife and married another woman mere days later, claiming that his ex was 'barren'.[16] This was supposed to be good Roman behaviour in the upper classes and that's apparently how Turia saw it. She was willing to sacrifice herself and her position as a married woman to live, effectively, as a concubine in order to allow Lucretius to have heirs. Lucretius disagreed with her interpretation of their marriage and their honour. He saw divorcing her not as an honourable act but as a shameful betrayal of her love and fidelity. Lucretius reacted to her proposal with horror and pain. He expressed awe at her courage and sacrifice, but recounted that he found the idea of being separated from his wife, even nominally, to be appalling. She had done so much for him during his exile and his proscription, and he was so happy with her, that it hurt him even all those years later to think of ever marrying someone else.

The whole affair is deeply emotional and deeply interesting. It is fascinating to see a long-term elite marriage in these terms, when they are so often depicted as transactional. In the previous chapter, I talked about the rise of *sine manu* marriage as a strategy to keep wealth within natal families and how this empowered women within upper-class marriages and it was a bit dry, but that is the traditional narrative of the Late Republican elite experience of marriage: it was business-like. Here, however, we see that there are other dimensions. First, that some upper-class Romans really did marry for love, even in the case of arranged marriages. They weren't all out with Clodia ruining the reputations of young men in swimming pools. Some genuinely were at home gazing into one another's eyes for an entire lifetime of mature and growing love.

Secondly, some people did enter old-fashioned, conservative *manus* marriages, where the wife's property was held by the husband who was effectively her legal guardian as well as her husband. This sounds creepy as hell, I know, especially when Lucretius affectionately refers to Turia as his daughter in the context of inheritance, but the way that Lucretius talks about their *manus* marriage demonstrates that it had a rich emotional dimension for them too. The mixing of their property and her trust in him to manage it all for her, even in the event of the divorce she proposed, is clearly an aspect and expression of the love that they share. When he talks about the *manus* marriage and his role as guardian of Turia and her property, he speaks of them as facets of their love. He saw her refusing to remove her property from his care if they divorced as a symbol of the fact that they would not *really* be separating. In his paragraph on their shared management of the properties, which were presumably significant as he owned Milo's giant house, he describes her giving over control of her inheritance willingly and without restriction as a romantic gesture. At the end of the *Laudatio*, he states that he wishes that he had died first so that he could have left her all his property as if she were his daughter. There is a lot of chat about property and it looks out of place in a eulogy to us. If I went to a funeral and the deceased's spouse started wanging on about how they split their mortgage, I would definitely be weirded out by it, and

many people find pre-nuptial contracts to be unromantic. But the Romans felt differently. For them (or the upper classes at least), the sharing and management of property was deeply connected to how they felt about one another.

And then Turia died. After four decades of marriage, as the Roman world settled into the Pax Romana, some illness or accident stole her away from her Lucretius, leaving him walking around like an open wound. 'You deserved everything but that it did not fall to my lot to give you everything as I ought', he wrote, 'would that … I had died leaving you still alive … You have bequeathed me sorrow and left me a miserable man … I am tormented by two emotions: grief and fear – and I do not stand firm against either.' Lucretius's grief is palpable even after two millennia, and it compelled him to etch his memories of his wife into stone monoliths in an attempt to tell everyone about her. In doing so, he captured a snapshot of how women's lives could be impacted by the political winds of the Late Republic, in ordinary and extra-ordinary ways.

In his eulogy, Lucretius strove to demonstrate to everyone that his wife had been exceptional, had lived an exceptional life with exceptional courage and that her passing had left him truly bereft. All his efforts were not in vain. Although her real name is forever lost, her life and deeds really have been immortalised by her husband. Her *Laudatio* offers a window into a marriage between two conservative upper-class people on the losing side of the civil wars, how they survived and how they loved one another fiercely and actively every single day through all the turmoil of the collapse of the Roman Republic.

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† When the first five pieces of the memorial were reconstructed, archaeologists realised that every line containing the recipient's name was missing. To identify her, they went scouring the surviving texts for stories that matched the stories on the memorial. Philippe della Torre found one which was reasonably similar in Appian's history of the Late Republican civil wars and, from that moment on, the woman has been known as Turia, the wife of Quintus Lucretius Vespillo who served as consul in 19 BCE, and Theodor Mommsen agreed with him when he first published the inscription in 1863. Orelli, 1828: 352–4; Mommsen, 1863: 466–7. Academics have had some very snippy arguments in the intervening century about the validity of this identification. Some have defended the similarities between a section of the memorial and what we know about Turia and Lucretius from the written sources, while others have *furiously* denounced Mommsen's identification based on a range of arguments which veer wildly from dense historiography to disgusted snobbery about the grammar on display. Horsfall, 1983 is the most ferocious opponent of the identification; Lindsay, 2009 a recent defender. Most people, like myself, fall in the middle and will use the name without taking a definitive stance on whether it's really that Turia. Osgood, 2014: 118–23.

It doesn't really matter anymore whether the memorial *actually* is an epitaph for a real Turia. She has been known only as Turia in scholarship for almost two hundred years and so Turia is what we shall call her too.

THE EMPIRE

Julia Caesar

27 BCE

The Princess

When Julia was born, at the tail end of 39 BCE, she was named Julia Caesari Filia: Julia, the daughter of Caesar, because her father was in the second of his many transformations and was, at the time, known as Gaius Julius Caesar. He's not the Julius Caesar you are thinking of, though. This is his posthumously adopted son, who was born Gaius Octavius Thurinus (Octavian). When Julia was eleven years old, her name was changed along with her father's when he entered the third phase of his life. Octavian became Caesar and then Caesar became Augustus, and Julia became Julia Augusti Filia: Julia, the daughter of Augustus.† In her naming, and in the eyes of so many who have thought about her, Julia is little more than an offshoot of her dad, an appendage to his glory as he rose to become the first Roman monarch in five hundred years and she was dragged along behind him to be made the first Roman princess.

Julia was born while her dad was about half-way along his Pokémon evolution from awkward sickly teenager to the Great Augustus, and right at the end of his second marriage. And I really mean *right* at the end. The day she was born, her dad served her mum Scribonia divorce papers. Right as she's lying there, having just survived her third labour without painkillers, holding her swaddled, hours-old daughter, he walks out on their marriage because it is no longer useful to him. Augustus is ice cold like that his entire life. Modern descriptions of Augustus's decision to divorce Scribonia are emblematic of the misogyny permeating, well, everything. The description most often quoted is that of Suetonius which says, in the original, '*"pertaesus," ut scribit, "morum perversitatem eius"*'.[1] This broadly means that he was bored or wearied by her ways. But that little adjective, *perversitatem*, had variously been translated as bitter, shrewish and nagging. *Perversus* means none of these things. It just means wrong or bad. Nagging and shrewish and bitter are how male translators have *interpreted* a 'bad' wife. And none of them managed to resolve in their minds the later statement by Suetonius that Scribonia's main issue with their marriage had been that Augustus wouldn't stop knobbing other women. Shrewish indeed.

Anyway. Because of her incessant refusal to let him fuck whoever he wanted, Augustus abandoned Scribonia with their daughter while he went off to continue waging war on everyone who blinked. At the time of her birth, Julia's dad had completed his campaign of revenge against Brutus and Cassius two years previously and was beginning to deliberately pick apart the Triumvirate he was using to legitimise his wars. He started this by handing over his long-suffering sister to endure Mark Antony as a husband, thus making Lepidus an outsider in his own Triumvirate. He'd spend the next couple of years warring his way around Italy and stealing people's wives. Meanwhile Julia stayed with her mother who did her best to stay out of things, and that's where she probably would have stayed for the rest of her life, living the average life of a very rich girl, had her father been normal or if he'd had any other children.

Unfortunately for Julia, Augustus was not in the least bit normal. He was terrifying. And, due to some strange quirk of biology, he and his final wife Livia never had a successful pregnancy. As both had children from previous relationships, one can't help but wonder whether some god or other wasn't trying to interfere with whatever Augustus would have done if he had had a son. Or maybe fate just has a sense of humour. Either way, at some point Augustus came to some kind of terms with the fact that Julia was going to be his one and only child, and so he retrieved her from her mother's household and installed her in his own magnificent palace on the Palatine Hill. This definitely happened before Julia was in her tweens, at some point between the age of one and eleven. I'm never sure whether I hope this happened earlier or later, because she was taken from what was probably a relatively normal aristocratic household and placed into Augustus's luxurious cage.

Augustus's palace felt like a cage because he was a micromanager obsessed with his image. This obsession was both deeply creepy and the key to his success. Hyper-aware of how he looked to his contemporaries and how he would look to historians, he once wrote a casual letter to his stepson Tiberius claiming that he didn't make the people he gambled with pay their debts because 'my generosity will exalt me to immortal glory'.[2] Obviously this makes him sound like a maniac. Even more bizarrely, he forced his grandsons to imitate his handwriting as part of their education and boasted about it.[3] Augustus was also powerfully, and apparently sincerely, dedicated to 'bringing back traditional values', including locking his daughter away so she could remain modest and private and spend her days weaving tunics for her father to wear. According to Suetonius, who read and quoted extensively from Augustus's letters, Julia was prevented from meeting any strangers and anyone who popped in to visit her would receive a sternly worded letter from a man no one ever wanted to receive a sternly worded letter from. Her father instead made sure that she was taught to spin and weave, like the old Republican women of myth and yore, and forbade her from ever saying anything that could not be safely recorded in the household diary.[4] So I am never sure whether I would want Julia to have some years of relative freedom, with her own friends and her mum, before she was shoved into her golden cage, or whether she would have suffered more from knowing a world outside of the walls of her prison. I do know that I would probably stamp on a puppy to get my hands on that household diary though.

Julia's misfortune was being born to a man who spent his entire adult life, from the age of twenty, dedicated to forging a new form of monarchy and who saw everyone in his life as merely a means to that end.[5] If he had had a son, that son would have been raised to be his partner in ruling and his heir to the throne, but instead he had a daughter and a daughter was useful only for creating sons-in-law and hopefully having sons. Julia had two roles in life. She was to behave as a perfect, ideal Roman girl and she was to be a conduit for her father's power via marriage and motherhood.

She married her first husband in 25 BCE, aged thirteen. Her betrothed was Marcellus, her sixteen-year-old first cousin and Augustus's only male biological relative. One can sort of imagine Augustus's increasing frustration as every single member of his family just *kept* having girls, because the minute his sister Octavia had a boy as her third child (followed by two more girls) Augustus swooped in on him as his heir. The minute that Julia reached a marriageable age, he rushed them through a wedding that he didn't even bother to attend. The wedding was unimportant. The important part was that marriage to Julia made Marcellus

Augustus's son-in-law. As we learned from the Sabine women, a son-in-law was the next best thing to a real son. It's no coincidence that every surviving version of the Sabine women story was written under Augustus's all-seeing eye.

This was Julia's use to her father: a prize he gave his favourite men, an honour that demonstrated Augustus's favour and signalled to the world that her husband was a special member of the imperial family. Julia's marriage to Marcellus represented a change from the usual practice though, and shows how subtly Augustus used existing norms in slightly different ways to change his whole world.

Previously, the two men connected through marriage had usually been equals, men of a similar age and status who shared a woman in common. That woman temporarily made the two men family and the marriage signalled to the watching world that they were great pals who would definitely not go to war with one another. That's why Pompey married Caesar's daughter Julia. That's why Antony married Augustus's sister Octavia. That's why Julia's first engagement had been at the age of two to Mark Antony's son. Marriage alliances in the Republic were a promise between two men of equal(ish) standing to do political favours for one another and an extra pinky promise to try not to kill one another. As a result, almost no young girls within spitting distances of the 0.1% of Roman politics married someone of their own generation for their first marriage, and they never married their own biological cousins because that would be (a) useless politically and (b) gross. Young Republican girls were all married off to their dad's friends and frenemies. With Julia's marriage to Marcellus, Augustus changed the rules for his family.

In 27 BCE, four years after Mark Antony and Cleopatra's defeat at Actium, the Senate and People of Rome granted their new ruler the name Augustus and the title *princeps* (first man). These titles and some other provisions elevated him above every other Patrician, magistrate, Senator and dictator. As the only man of his rank, he held a position no one had held since Tarquinius Superbus. He had no rivals left so he didn't need alliances with anyone. He needed an heir. With Julia, Augustus created a whole new type of marriage alliance, exclusive to the newly anointed imperial family. Julia didn't provide a connection between two equals, either of whom could call off the alliance at any time. Instead she was a vessel for Augustus's power to travel from one generation to the next, and the right to bang her was the right to create a new generation for Augustus. He reduced Julia to a walking womb.

Just a year or so after the wedding, in 23 BCE, this first experiment in creating a dynasty came to an abrupt and depressing end when Marcellus got sick and died, leaving Julia a widow at maybe fifteen years old. Julia's reaction to her widowhood is not recorded, partly because Augustus took charge of everything and mourned the kid both as if he were his own son and as a public figure. Marcellus, the teenage Senator who achieved nothing beyond being born into the Julian family and being a boy, got a whole state-funded funeral. Augustus himself stood on the speaker's platform in the Forum and read the eulogy. Both a theatre and a library were named after him. In a legitimately wild piece of sucking up, Virgil added Marcellus to the parade of dead heroes met by Aeneas in book six of the *Aeneid*, during his trip to the Underworld, and the description of Marcellus – who was so young he'd not even be allowed to drink or vote in America – is something else. It includes some allusions to Marcellus's unconquered valour in war. I love this bit because, sure, any teenager who has not been to war can claim to be technically unconquered.[6] Every new recruit to any army can claim to be unconquered. When I die, I'd like everyone to write a poem and celebrate the fact that I was also undefeated in battle,

thanks. The point of all this is that Augustus used Marcellus's death to demonstrate that his family now *was* the Roman state and his loss was their loss.

Unfortunately, as a girl, poor Julia is nowhere to be found in all of this. All we know is that, after a surprisingly long two years of widowhood while Augustus waited for a new heir to show up, Julia was handed over to a new husband. Augustus had no more nephews so instead he chose a more immediate successor and gave Julia to his long-time best friend and sidekick, Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa.

Again, one can never know how Julia felt about these things. How did she feel about being a princess, about being a marker of succession? We do have one source claiming to record some quips and jokes of Julia's, making her just about the only Roman woman to have ever made a joke. Naturally, being Roman jokes, they are about as funny as syphilis. Also, they were written down in the fourth century CE, a solid 450 years after Julia lived, so it's tough to consider them genuine quotes. They appear in a work of philosophical fiction by a Late Antique aristocrat called Macrobius. The book, written in about 430 CE, presents itself as an account of a discussion held between attendees at a Saturnalia (Roman Christmas) party. It contains a lot of stuff, including some long critiques of Virgil which suggest that you might never want to go to one of Macrobius's dinner parties, and in the middle of book two an unexpected description of Julia, daughter of Augustus, in her later life. Macrobius describes her as a smart lover of literature, kind, generous and lacking in cruelty, slightly vain, a bit arrogant, constantly cracking jokes at her father's expense and, in general, a woman of high spirits and great fun. Like Princess Margaret. This is a description of her when she is thirty-seven (an age Macrobius offensively describes as very old indeed), and lord knows none of us are the same at thirty-seven as we were at eighteen. The general sense, however, is of a woman who embraced every opportunity to enjoy herself, no matter how limited those opportunities were. We will get to most of her little quips later, as they're spoilers, but one stands out as being emblematic. It begins with a friend rebuking Julia for being, basically, too much fun in the way that the Vestal Virgin Postumia was too much fun and suggesting that she conform better to her father's austere lifestyle. To this suggestion, Julia replied, 'he never forgets that he is Caesar, but I remember that I am Caesar's daughter.' By this she means, 'he has responsibilities. He has to be well behaved. But I am a princess, and I can do what the fuck I like.'

So that's Julia when she is thirty-seven and I sort of hope that it was Julia at eighteen too, because it suggests that, alongside her father's strict sobriety and old-fashioned values, she was also indulged and spoiled and allowed to get away with all kinds of things, as long as she didn't say no when he asked her to marry someone. And to her credit, she never did. She said yes to her cousin, and she said yes to Agrippa, who was in his forties when she married him. And she kept saying yes. She made her father's life complete in 21 BCE, eighteen months or so after the wedding, when she gave birth to a baby boy, Gaius Vipsanius Agrippa. Then she had a girl in 19 BCE (probably Julia the Younger), another boy in 17 BCE called Lucius, another girl in 15 BCE and a final boy in 12 BCE. She not only gave Augustus the male heirs he so desperately desired, she also seemed to embody Augustus's new ideal of the family. An ideal he was in the process of forcing on absolutely everyone.

We have to take a small detour here to talk about Augustus's morality legislation of 18/17 BCE, because although it sounds boring it is crucial. During that period, Augustus passed two laws which were both deeply unusual, extremely invasive in a Roman context, and profoundly important to Augustus's 'restructuring of the whole state' project. The first was the *Lex Julia de Maritandis Ordinibus*, the

Julian Law on Marriage between the Orders. This law laid down rules about who was allowed to marry who, largely by telling the Senatorial class that they weren't allowed to marry people who had previously been enslaved, actors or sex workers. Or the children of actors, because apparently that pollution lives in the blood. While these were restrictions, the main aim of the law was to force or encourage more people in the higher classes to marry in general. Augustus penalised people who chose not to marry and people who tried to prevent others from marrying. He reduced a father's ability to keep his daughter unmarried at home, for example, and forbade people from granting legacies with the condition that the recipient remain unmarried. Quite why Romans were going around using their wills to bribe their friends and family into not getting married is beyond me, but Augustus was worried about it. Finally, this first law strongly encouraged people to have as many babies as possible. Fathers were given advantages in politics, with more advantages coming with each living child. Women in Rome who had three children were released from guardianship, meaning they could act as legal adults unlike all their one-and-done friends. That was Augustus's first foray into interfering in the family.

His second was the *Lex Julia de Adulteriis*, and this one really got stuck in. As you probably guessed, this is a law making adultery illegal and defining adultery for the first time. Both men and women could be guilty of adultery but it is defined as 'fornication'† with a married woman, a virgin, a widow, a divorced woman 'of respectable station' or a man. This technically makes sex between two unmarried men adultery, but Augustus never was very careful when it came to the wording of his laws. Notably, it also doesn't account for the idea that women might bang one another, which is what happens when you don't let women into law making. Anyway. People found guilty of adultery were to be banished to islands and have half their property confiscated. Women convicted of adultery were also forbidden from marrying again and from giving evidence in court, suggesting they were eventually allowed to come back from their island.[7] In the very specific circumstance when a father or guardian found their daughter/charge in the middle of committing adultery, then they could kill the man, but only if they *also* killed their own daughter. How often that happened is anyone's guess.

Augustus's morality laws were astonishing incursions into the domestic sphere on the part of the government. Marriage and childbearing and what to do with your wife when she was banging Priscus down the road were *family* matters, intensely private and absolutely nothing to do with the public courts. A family decision on whether to marry their daughter off or keep an unplanned child had never before been tied to their political career, but Augustus tangled them together. In the mini hagiography he wrote for himself, Augustus claimed that he introduced these laws in order to restore 'many traditions of our ancestors which were then falling into disuse, and I myself set precedents in many things for posterity to imitate'.[8] He strengthened the Roman focus on the family as a political act by encouraging people like Livy and Ovid to write their histories and reshape Rome's mythical beginnings to fit his social reforms. Augustus's ability to couch brand new things in trappings of ancient tradition remains unparalleled. The question is why, and indeed why is this relevant to Julia, and the answer to those two questions is the same: a significant part of Augustus's recreation of the Roman state in his own image was the transformation of what it meant for men to participate in the state. From the overthrow of Tarquinius Superbus in 509 BCE until Augustus's victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE,† Rome had been an oligarchy. Families competed, exclusively through their men, to win power, influence and offices. Augustus, however, transformed that oligarchy into a monarchy, with one family ruling supreme

forever, and every other family relegated to fighting for scraps, but without telling anyone that they now lived under a monarchy. Told you he was terrifying. His big idea – his brilliant idea – was to reorient men towards the family and encourage them to compete for status within the spheres of morality and idealised domesticity.[9] He encouraged them to participate in public life not just by trying to be consul, but by proving how perfectly their family functioned. Thus, we see lots of public discussions of, and legal incursions into, female virtue, domestic concerns and private life. Augustus made the family, rather than the political arena, the primary locus of civic life. And he tried to turn his own family into an exemplar.

This is where Julia comes in. Augustus's creation of the principate – the official name of this peculiar Roman monarchy – was a long, slow process. It took decades. The laws of 18/17 BCE were still being adjusted thirty years later in 9 CE. Augustus made his own family utterly integral to the process as exemplars for others. He no longer competed for political offices[†] and so he aimed to provide a model for everyone else of how to do public life in his new reality. He would be the model father and husband, and his wife and children and all his many dependants would behave themselves too and show the rest of the Senate and magistrates how this new world worked. While Julia was married to Agrippa, she did this incredibly well. She was a loyal wife, she had a lot of children, she wove woollen tunics, she obeyed her father. She even obeyed her father when, in 17 BCE, he adopted her two sons out from under her and took them into his home as his heirs.

When historians ancient and modern write about this, they usually write from Augustus's perspective or a neutral third-party perspective, and often focus on the strange details. Like the fact that there was no real process for adopting infants in Roman law so Augustus had to symbolically 'buy' the two boys by tapping a coin on a scale.[10] What no one considers is what it might have been like for Julia to have her sons taken away from her and raised by her own father as the sons he always wanted. Meanwhile, her daughters were left with her, useless lumps to her father until they were of marriageable age. Julia had produced her heir and a spare (and some girls) and now Augustus could focus on training up some babies in his image. Julia suddenly lost all value, and her husband got bumped right down the line of succession. Augustus left her twiddling her thumbs at home and, judging by the two more kids they had, banging to pass the time. Julia had been a useful womb, pumped full of babies and dumped when she produced the requisite number of boys. This is what the introduction of Augustan monarchy did to women: it reduced them to baby machines who produced male heirs. As Augustus forced men to turn to the family for status, he made the traditional boxes of wife and mother all the more restrictive. He did this for every member of the political classes, but especially his own daughter, who was given no outlet beyond producing heirs for her father. Not even for her and her husband. She produced her own brothers.

So it's no wonder, really, that she ended up going a bit off the rails. In 12 BCE, while Julia was pregnant with her fifth child, Agrippa died. Again, Julia's reaction to the death of her husband of a decade is not recorded, but as they travelled together extensively and had a very impressive five kids, one suspects they liked each other at least a bit. At a bare minimum, the end of a long marriage and loss of someone she'd known her whole life can't have been pleasant. And it left Julia a widow again, before she was thirty. Technically, Augustus's own laws allowed Julia to be released from guardianship and from the obligation to remarry. Technically, Julia had done enough to earn herself a little break to focus on Julia, maybe read a book, get a mani-pedi. But Julia was Julia Augusti Filia and the daughters of Augustus were never free to focus on themselves. Augustus might have got his sons

from her, but Gaius and Lucius, at six and three, were still babies. They were Augustus's long-term plan, but he still needed a short-term emergency contingency and Julia was still useful for conferring legitimacy. He chose as his potential second-in-command until the kids came of age his dour, lumpen stepson Tiberius.

Tiberius's reactions to being made to marry Julia are well recorded in the surviving sources and he did not like it. First, his stepdad forced him to divorce his current wife, Agrippina Vipsania, who was – because the Julio-Claudian family was disgusting – Agrippa's eldest daughter and Julia's stepdaughter. He and Vipsania were very happy together and Tiberius did not want to divorce her. Indeed, he had to be prevented from even catching sight of her after the divorce following an embarrassing incident where they met at a party and Tiberius cried. He was like that. Secondly, according to Suetonius, Tiberius thought that Julia fancied him too much and made it too obvious while she had been married to Agrippa, and that made him uncomfortable.[11] It is a real challenge for me to imagine any woman fancying Tiberius, who comes across in both literary sources and statuary as being as sexy as a frozen chicken, but who am I to kink-shame. Maybe Julia did fancy him. Maybe she was delighted to get her little princess hands on him. Maybe he had a great butt. I don't know. That's the story. Tacitus, who wrote the main narrative history of the Julio-Claudian era, tells a *totally* different version; one where Julia loathed Tiberius for being socially beneath her and wrote a furious letter to her father trying to get out of the marriage and violently slagging Tiberius off.[12] It didn't work, obviously, because Augustus simply did not care about other people's stupid, boring feelings. Either way, the general sentiment of the sources is that the marriage was doomed from the start. The couple do seem to have got on OK for a little while and Julia even got pregnant early in the marriage. That was enough to get Julia to travel with her husband to Aquileia where she gave birth to her sixth child, a son who survived just a few days.

The death of their son seems also to have been the death of their marriage. He died at around about the same time that Tiberius's younger brother Drusus also died (from falling off a horse because the whole of the Claudian family were just bumble-butts apparently). It was just an enormously upsetting time which served only to drive them apart. Tiberius and Julia lived separate lives until, in 6 BCE after five years of marriage, Tiberius declared that he was over the whole politics and Rome thing and retired to live a life of whittling in Rhodes. It's unclear what sparked this. Some think that he was trying to escape Julia. Others, that Tiberius was jealous of Gaius and Lucius, who were now entering public life. Yet others suggested that Tiberius was afraid of Gaius and Lucius, who were becoming arrogant and insolent in their supremacy.[13] Whatever the reason, he went on hunger strike until Augustus let him leave Rome and never spoke to his wife again.

It's interesting to me that Tiberius just cracked and ran away from Rome, effectively exiling himself, because this decision coincides with Julia also losing her patience with her golden cage and rebelling in a spectacular fashion. The fact that two very close members of Augustus's family went rogue at almost exactly the same time is suggestive I think. Especially as they both abandoned the things that made them valuable to Augustus, the things most important to their personae as public figures. Tiberius abandoned his successful political and military careers and fled to become a private colonial commoner. Meanwhile, Julia abandoned any semblance of the traditional feminine morality and virtue her father was attempting to force on Romans and started shagging around.

The year 2 BCE was a big one for Augustus and his family. It marked twenty-five years since Augustus had 'restored' the Republic and to celebrate he had

'accepted' the title of *Pater Patriae* – father of the country. The youngest of Julia's sons, Lucius, had finally turned sixteen so Augustus decided to share the consulship with his teenage heir. Finally, in his very own month of August, he had officially opened his own forum and the Temple of Mars Ultor. A whole lot of celebrating went on and everything seemed to be going very well. Until one day, a letter arrived at the Senate from Augustus with distressing news. Augustus told the Senators in his very serious letter that his daughter had committed multiple adulteries with a long list of men and that she had been doing this in public, including on the speaker's platform (the *rostra*) in the Forum. With this, the Senate learned that *all* Julio-Claudian family business was public business and that Augustus expected them to have legal opinions on his daughter's sex life.

It appears that, with her husband out of town and most of her kids adopted out from under her, Julia lost patience with her father's rule and reforms and went absolutely wild. The earliest source for the scandal claims that she had five boyfriends, including her first fiancé, Mark Antony's son.[14] She had then gone out of her way to violate the places her father held most dear, the places representing his good old-fashioned, totally imaginary Republican values. She fucked in the Forum. She fucked on the *rostra.* She fucked by the statue of the satyr Marsyas, who represented liberty and free speech and was often used as a symbol of opposition to Augustus by his enemies.[15] She fucked his great rival's son. She found everything that Augustus claimed to stand for and love, every possible way to hurt him, and she fucked on it. As a display of daddy issues, Julia's rebellion was world class.

Macrobius's fifth-century version of Julia is based strongly on the reputation she developed after 2 BCE and it's a very fun one. Like Clodia before her, she is sexy as hell, surrounded by hot young boys at all times and regularly dressed in what Macrobius describes as 'provocative' dresses and it all makes her dad furious. Almost all the quips ascribed to Julia by Macrobius show her taking the piss out of her dad's attempts to control her, while she lives a life of raucous partying and sex. In one, she turns up to visit her dad wearing a sexy little dress, drawing his silent disapproval. The next day she rolls up wearing a more modest dress and Augustus praises her for dressing more appropriately for a daughter of Augustus. To this, Julia snorts and replies, 'yesterday I was dressed for my husband, today I am dressed for my father.'[16] The Romans were just fundamentally not a funny people. This is top-notch humour for them. In another, Augustus makes a joke when he finds Julia having her grey hairs plucked. He asks her whether she'd rather be grey or bald, to which she replies that she would rather be grey. 'Then why,' asks her dad, 'are these women trying so hard to make you bald?' On the one hand, this attempts the structure of a joke, but on the other, there's a reason no one ever said Augustus was funny.

One particularly famous quip from Macrobius's work is Julia's response when a friend asked her how it was that she could be so promiscuous and yet never have an illegitimate child. No one ever questioned the legitimacy of her kids. She replied with a wink that she 'never takes on a passenger unless the ship's hold is already full'.[17] Another time, someone wondered aloud why animals only had sex in order to breed and Julia theorised that sex for fun was a uniquely, and gloriously, human activity. In Macrobius's telling, and in many versions of her life, Julia Augusti Filia absolutely loved to *fuck.*

We have no record of how Julia reacted to the realisation that her father knew what she was up to, or to her antics being exposed to the Senate. Realistically, if the accounts of her nocturnal activities in the Forum are even slightly true, she can't

have been surprised. Rome was a village full of gossips at the best of times, and everyone knew what everyone was doing in their bedrooms. If someone stubbed their toe in the Forum, every Tom, Dick and Cassius down the road would hear about it before dinnertime. Getting her tits out in a big open public space meant she basically *wanted* her dad to know about it. So let's assume that she wasn't shocked to be found out. She might have been surprised, however, by the cavernous, extreme depth of her father's anger, shame and sense of betrayal and how publicly he dealt with it. The general rules of Roman parent–child relations were that disputes were dealt with privately, quietly and with a minimum of publicity, especially with daughters. Remember when all those women were handed over to their families for execution after the Bacchanalia Conspiracy. But Augustus's family was not a general, common-or-garden Roman family. Augustus had made the Domus Augusta (the imperial family) a public institution. Plus he was right in the middle of eroding familial privacy for his own personal gain. So, he dealt with it in public. He got the Senate involved and made them listen to a litany of accusations about the princess banging various consuls in places where Senators spent a lot of their day. I imagine this was a lot like when we all first read the Charles and Camilla TamponGate transcripts.† Just horribly awkward and gross.

Augustus reacted to his daughter's betrayal of everything he stood for in the same way he reacted to Quinctilius Varus losing three legions in the Teutoburg Forest: badly. That time, he spent months locked in his house, growing his beard and occasionally banging his head on a door frame wailing, 'Quinctilius Varus, give me back my eagles!' After Julia's failure to be what he demanded she be, he also locked himself away in shame and fury and made ludicrous, melodramatic statements. In this case, he took to declaring that he wished that he had never married and died without children. When he heard that one of Julia's friends, Phoebe, had taken her own life in the fallout, he sulkily declared himself jealous of her father. He referred to Julia as a boil.[18] In his fury, he had her main boyfriend Iullus Antoninus executed, and he exiled Julia to Pandateria (Ventotene) in the Tyrrhenian Sea where she was banned from drinking wine or having male visitors or male attendants, even enslaved ones, unless they were particularly unattractive. Julia was accompanied to the island by her mother Scribonia. Scribonia had no obligation to follow her daughter. She went out of love and devotion for her youngest child. Julia was thirty-seven when she was exiled. She had been married three times, widowed twice and abandoned once. In 2 BCE she had maybe forty more years of life ahead of her, alone with no one but her mum.

The people of Rome were generally more shocked by Augustus's punishment of Julia's adulteries than they were by the adulteries themselves. He claimed either that she had been plotting against him with her boyfriends, or that her extra-marital bonking was *in itself* treason – a wild claim – and that this justified his harsh punishment. People, including Tiberius, repeatedly tried to persuade him to bring her back from exile, saying she had suffered enough for what was, really, barely a crime. But Augustus was not the forgiving type. After one such occasion, when people tried to appeal to him in open session, he became furious and told them that he hoped the gods cursed them all with daughters and wives like her. His only concession was to move her to a slightly nicer exile after five years. Julia moved to live in the city of Rhegium (Reggio Calabria) in southern Italy, where she was allowed to leave the house and meet people and have an allowance and a household.

This probably suited Julia just fine. After almost forty years of being the public daughter of a monarch, recipient of every luxury and unable to do a damn thing she

wanted, the life of a reasonably rich provincial woman was probably just what she needed. No one in the empire knew better than her how hard the forced transition from republic to monarchy was and how much she had had to sacrifice without ever benefiting. Once living in provincial comfort, albeit surrounded by her father's spies, she could chill out a bit. She was still being punished though, separated from the glamour of Rome and from all her children. She had to hear about their tragic fates second hand. First Lucius died of illness in Gaul in 2 CE, then Gaius was killed in Armenia in 4 CE. Following the loss of both his heirs, Augustus hastily adopted Julia's last son, Agrippa Postumus, only to exile him in 6 CE for liking fishing too much. Her two daughters survived in Rome, until 8 CE, when the eldest, Julia the Younger, was also exiled by Augustus for adultery. Only Agrippina, known as Agrippina the Elder, remained with Augustus. Julia maybe hoped that her father would mellow and forgive as he got old, as he continued to lose grandchildren. At the very least, she may have thought, she would get something in his will and could rebuild a little when he was gone. If she ever hoped these things in her exile, she was very, very wrong.

Augustus never forgave Julia and he explicitly disinherited her. He even forbade her from being interred in his family mausoleum in the event of her death. Instead, when he died in 14 CE at the age of eighty, he left everything to his wife Livia and her son, his heir, the last man standing, Julia's ex-husband, Tiberius. Tiberius and Livia were now responsible for her allowance and her life.[19] And they didn't care. In fact, they seemed to hate her more than her father ever did. For all the noises made about his harshness and his anger, Augustus didn't kill her and he didn't deprive her of a good life after the first couple of years. He didn't even make her get a job. On the other hand, Tiberius did two things: he immediately stopped paying her allowance and he killed her last son. Agrippa Postumus was stabbed on his island within days of Tiberius taking power, and Julia quickly found that her regular cash injections stopped coming. Tiberius left her to destitution and despair, until she wasted away.[20] Within a year of Tiberius's ascension to the throne, Julia was dead. She outlived four of her six children.† She was born a normal aristocratic woman and became a princess. From that day, to the moment of her death, her life was lived at the mercy of emperors as an unwilling trailblazer in the brave new world of the imperial family.

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† For simplicity, I am going to call him Augustus for this entire chapter because it's confusing to keep track otherwise and Julio-Claudian names are hard enough at the best of times.

† The Latin word is *stuprum*, which is one of those untranslatables. It means sexual dishonour and shame, or shameful sex.

† This is the battle where Augustus and Agrippa crushed Antony and Cleopatra, leaving Augustus as the sole survivor of the Triumvirate and the sole ruler of Rome.

† Not that he ever did, the little terrorist scamp.

† In 1993, a transcript of a phone call between the then Prince Charles (then still married to Diana) and Camilla Parker-Bowles leaked to the press, in which Charles stated that he wanted to 'live in' Camilla's trousers forever, ideally as a pair of knickers but, if not, then as a 'box of Tampax'. This is how royalty have phone sex and it is *awful*.

† Julia the Younger lived in exile until 29 CE, when she died of natural causes. Agrippina the Elder was eventually also exiled and later murdered by Tiberius.

Cartimandua and Boudicca

60 CE

The Client and the Rebel

Rome began expanding the territory it ruled about twenty-five minutes after its foundation. In the background of every story in this book so far has been an endless series of expansionist wars and battles as Roman exceptionalism became an effectively self-fulfilling prophecy. The Romans believed they were the best, that they deserved to rule the world, and they persisted on and on until they ruled half of it. Perhaps the most Roman of Roman cultural traits was the inability to ever back down. No matter how hard they were hit by an enemy, they always got back up and restarted the fight over and over until they ground their opponent down. Each victory brought new land, new money, new resources and new frontiers to conquer, bringing new victories and new resources and new wealth and new frontiers, and on and on it goes. As resources flowed into Rome, Rome got stronger and took on bigger enemies who were further away and it seemed like the gods loved them and they were the rightful rulers of everyone. By the end of the reign of Augustus, the empire stretched from Brest in Brittany to Aleppo in Syria, from Egyptian Aswan to German Mainz.

The end of the reign of Augustus and the smooth ascension of Tiberius to the Roman throne brought about the end of traditional Roman history, Francis Fukuyama style. The (almost) universal acceptance of Tiberius as the new *princeps* cemented monarchy as the system of Roman government and forced historians to re-think what constituted Roman historical events. During the centuries of the Republic, Roman histories focused on internal struggles in Rome between Senators. Elections, battles, crises and revolts all came back to the city and the endless contest between aristocratic families for supremacy. When the Julio-Claudians ended the contest, they ended those classic Roman dramas. Tiberius officially ended elections as soon as he became emperor and took sole, personal responsibility for choosing all magistrates and generals, so men writing histories of their own time had to go looking for conflict outside of the city.[1] The vista of the Roman Empire widens enormously when this happens and allows us to start travelling around to have a peek at the world outside of the Eternal City. We begin in a place those aristocrats considered to be the most barbaric and shitholeiest of shitholes: Britain.

The traditional story of the British relationship with Rome is one of pure resistance, focused almost entirely on the flowing-haired figure of Boudicca. Certainly, in my school days, when I learnt about the Romans in Britain, I learnt about Roman (implied to be Italian) soldiers battling a truculent native population who rejected ‘Romanisation’ and Roman ways. Even while I was being taken on school trips to Fishbourne Roman Palace, a ludicrously luxurious domestic villa in Sussex dating from 75 CE, I was still being sold a narrative of the brash ‘Celt’, painted blue and screaming bloody murder at anyone in a tunic. And that is *part* of the story. Another part of the story, however, is one of enthusiastic collaborators who leapt at the chance to hang out with the Romans. The sexy, powerful, cool

Romans, lords of the Mediterranean with their olives and their wine and access to peppercorns offered a lot to those who were willing to compromise. And many, like Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes, loved compromise.

The little island of Britain never held a huge amount of interest for the Romans until the day that Julius Caesar arrived on the beaches of Hauts-de-France and realised he could literally see the white cliffs shining back at him from Dover. Caesar, never daunted by anything at all, took Roman power to Britain in 55 BCE, certain of success, but was pretty much immediately seen off. Within a matter of a few very stressful days, he had been booted off the island. Nothing pissed off a Roman like defeat so the very next year Caesar returned with a much larger, better prepared force.[2] This time he made it the sixty-odd miles to the Thames, took no decent booty, freaked out at the idea of being stuck in England for the whole winter (relatable) and then went back to France to start a different war. And no one looked at Britain again for a full century.

By 43 CE, the monarchical system in Rome had existed for three generations and it felt like Rome had given up on expansion. Augustus explicitly told his successors that he didn't want the borders extended any further. Tiberius had religiously adhered to the edict, mostly because he didn't like leaving the house, while Gaius didn't live long enough to get anything done. Gaius had, however, made some noises about invading Britain. So, when Gaius's icky uncle Claudius became emperor and absolutely nobody liked him (including his own wives), he seized on an opportunity arising in northern Gaul, giving him an excuse to one-up his own dead nephew, gain some popularity among the armies and finish what Julius Caesar sort of started. It began when Verica, king of the British Atrebates kingdom (based in modern-day Hampshire and Sussex), rolled up in Gaul claiming that he had been exiled following a war with the Catuvellauni kingdom (based in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Yes, this is a War of the Home Counties). Verica asked the Romans for help getting his throne back, and Claudius replied that he could do one better than that: he could colonise the whole damn country. Thus, using Verica as an excuse, Claudius saddled up some elephants (not a joke) and stormed into southern England. He blasted his way up through Britain very quickly and eleven rulers of British kingdoms immediately surrendered to him.[3] Among these rulers was, maybe, Cartimandua.

Cartimandua appears three times in Tacitus's books, which is two more times than Boudicca, but she has largely been forgotten by historians for various reasons, mostly that her story isn't as balls-out cool as Boudicca's. Nor do we have any unforgettable descriptions of her as we do for Boudicca, with her flowing hair and her inexplicably massive body.[4] Cartimandua is simply a queen who ruled a kingdom and never went into battle, and it's hard to feel things for a queen who is never described. But she was, to the Romans, far more important than Boudicca, and around for a lot longer; her story adds a level of complexity to the story of the Roman Empire, and the Romans in Britain.

Cartimandua's first appearance in the written histories comes in 51 CE, about eight years after the invasion. In 51 CE, Cartimandua sat on the throne of the Brigantes, a huge kingdom in northern England. Brigantia spread, at least in parts, from the east to the west coasts of England, taking in the Pennines, the Lake District, Durham, North Yorkshire and Lancashire. Her power stretched beyond where Hadrian's Wall now sits and the Romans perceived the Brigantes to be the most populous and most powerful kingdom on the island. By 51 CE, Cartimandua was already a client to the Romans. This meant that she received the personal protection of the emperor (and all his little generals), and got preferential access to

Roman resources as well as significant financial rewards. It ensured that her status and position as queen would be pretty much secure for as long as she wanted them. In return, all she had to do was provide a buffer zone for the Romans. With a client queen in place, the Romans were saved the effort of actually having to occupy the whole of England north of Leeds, saving them a tonne of money and manpower. It was a compromise for both sides, but a mutually beneficial one which allowed client rulers a degree of personal power and autonomy as long as they were willing to bend their knee once in a while. Cartimandua was more than willing. Other rulers, however, were not, and the most troublesome of these for the first decade of the occupation was Caratacus of the Catuvellauni.

Back in 40 CE, it had been Caratacus who had made the truly terrible decision to declare war on Verica's kingdom. In the short term, he had expanded his kingdom significantly but when Verica came back a couple of years later hiding behind Claudius, tens of thousands of Roman soldiers and a couple of elephants, he may have begun to have some regrets. When it became clear the Romans were here to stay and Fishbourne Roman Palace was being built with its underfloor heating and cosy beds, Caratacus made himself the leader of the early British resistance, keeping the Romans perpetually miserable and afraid. He led everything from swift raids on hunting parties to full-scale battles. In 51 CE, he chose to make a massive stand, forcing the Romans into a pitched battle deep in mid-Wales. He chose the location and readied himself confidently for war. This was the second bad decision of his life. The Britons were good at guerrilla warfare and terrible in battle; the Romans slaughtered the resistance fighters. Caratacus escaped with his life and then made the third terrible decision of his life: he rolled up to Cartimandua's house.

In brief, Caratacus turned up out of the blue on Cartimandua's doorstep, fleeing from the Roman legions who wanted him dead and asking for asylum. Cartimandua kept him in Brigantia but sent messengers to the Romans to snitch on him. When the Romans showed up, Cartimandua handed over the rebel king with a smile. For this she is sometimes called the Quisling Queen. She sold out her own, the heroic British rebel, to the invading Romans and took her reward from her own oppressors. But to Cartimandua, Caratacus was not her own. All they had in common was living on the same island. There is a tendency to see the ancient peoples of Britain as the Romans saw them, as an essentially undifferentiated mass of barbarians painted blue and screaming and doing human sacrifices, or as an airy-fairy dreadlocked 'Celtic' mass, worshipping the moon or the sun or pixies or something. Neither image is particularly correct; there was no overarching British or 'Celtic' identity holding everyone together.[5] When Cartimandua looked at the situation in front of her, she saw not a Briton but a Catuvellauni, a historic enemy, and an opportunity.

Tacitus, however, saw only Britons and a woman ruling and both those things sort of disgusted him. But he also saw an opportunity in Cartimandua's decision to hand Caratacus over to Claudius: an opportunity to moralise. Moralising was Tacitus's absolute favourite thing, especially when he could do it about a woman. And his moralising is an opportunity too for us, to see how Tacitus shaped his narratives in different ways to make different points. Tacitus wrote about this moment in Cartimandua's career twice and with quite different takes. The first appears in the book we call his *Histories*, an account of the year 69 CE and the civil wars, while the second appears in his *Annals*, covering the years 14–68 CE. Tacitus is never kind about Cartimandua but the version of her he presents in the *Histories* is notably more cruel than the version he presents in the *Annals.* The Cartimandua

of the *Annals* has the defeated Caratacus appear in her kingdom asking for help and decides there and then to arrest him and hand him over.[6] In the *Histories*, however, Cartimandua is presented as tricking Caratacus into entering Brigantia so that she could arrest him and hand him over.[7] While the Cartimandua of the *Annals* is merely an opportunistic collaborator with her own oppressor for her own advantage, the Cartimandua of the *Histories* is a scheming Judas who went out of her way to undermine her 'own' people in order to ingratiate herself with the invaders. You might be wondering here, why the hell does Tacitus – a Roman Senator and relative of the ex-governor of Britain – consider his own side to be the oppressors and that's a great question; we will come back to it very shortly.

When Cartimandua apprehended and gave up Caratacus she won a huge amount of goodwill from the Roman authorities. The Romans had found Caratacus to be a surprisingly formidable enemy, and he had killed a large number of their soldiers. It's easy to forget with the passing of a couple of millennia and the clear evil empire intentions of the Romans that Roman soldiers were not cold-blooded Stormtroopers. They had feelings and, for many both in the Roman military and back in Rome, Caratacus had caused real grief and frustration. Caratacus was transported to Rome, where he was notorious as a barbarian rebel, and Claudius paraded him as the greatest treasure in his Triumph. The Romans were flipping delighted to have Caratacus and extremely grateful to Cartimandua for facilitating his capture. To show their gratitude, they gave her unconditional support and tonnes of cash. She got rich and cosy and even more powerful. It's hypothesised by most historians of early Roman Britain that Brigantia was less a tightly controlled kingdom and more a federation of leaders working with some independence, under the overall power of the single ruler at the top, much like the United States of America today.[8] When Roman favour fell on Cartimandua, the power of the local leaders within Brigantia declined while the queen's increased. Life was good, for a bit.

At some point after 51 CE but before 57 CE, Cartimandua's domestic troubles began. Or, at least, began to spill out into public. Cartimandua was married to a guy known as Venutius, who was clearly beneath her in status but who appears to have provided the military muscle in the relationship. There is a wee hint that Cartimandua's decision to arrest Caratacus fractured their marriage irreparably, because while Cartimandua became the golden child of the Roman Empire in Britain, Venutius later appeared as Caratacus's successor in causing the Romans pain. You could hypothesise (and people have) that Cartimandua's decision to tie herself closely with the Roman invaders tested Venutius's loyalty both to her and to the Romans. As Cartimandua's non-royal consort, Venutius pledged his loyalty to Claudius Caesar alongside his wife. At some point, however, he recanted, left his wife and went riding off into a different kingdom beyond Roman control, declaring himself Cartimandua's enemy. This may have remained a domestic issue if Cartimandua hadn't been quite so popular with and important to the Romans.

The queen responded to her husband leaving her and dedicating himself to making her life hard by very sensibly taking his brother and relatives hostage. Usually this kind of tactic forces an enemy to calm the flip down in order to protect the lives of their loved ones. Venutius, on the other hand, took this very basic tactic as a personal insult and it utterly infuriated him. Tacitus, being Tacitus, claims that Venutius was unwilling to submit to the authority of a woman. Roman to his core, Tacitus considered this to be the greatest humiliation that could be inflicted upon a man.[9] Being a Roman historian and more beholden to morals and literary tropes than to objectivity, he managed to conveniently forget that Venutius had lived under

the power of a female ruler for maybe a decade already. Gender and power do not appear to have posed the same problems for the Brigantes as they did for the Romans, and it doesn't seem hugely likely to me that Venutius *suddenly* became upset about being commanded by a girl. It seems more likely that he suddenly became upset about his wife's enthusiastic collusion with the Roman army.

Venutius reacted to his brother being taken hostage by Cartimandua by endangering him further. He rounded up a group of young men and led an invasion against the Brigantes, while also making some unspecified attacks on Roman forces. The Romans, however, kept a close eye on goings on and Caesius Nasica, a legion commander, predicted Venutius's movements. So, when Venutius and his little army turned up to fight Cartimandua, probably assuming that she would have no defence without her husband, they ran straight into a waiting Roman legion. Cartimandua as a ruler was simply too important to be overthrown. They needed her to remain in place, a friendly face in the far north of England advancing Roman interests at the very edge of the empire. An attack on Cartimandua was the same as an attack on Rome itself. So they swooped in and protected her, throwing their own men against Venutius's forces in order to save the queen's throne. That didn't often happen for women in the Roman Empire, but Romans were nothing if not pragmatic and, in practice, they didn't care about Cartimandua's gender. They only cared about protecting her, her throne and her kingdom. They owed her and they could not afford to invade Leeds right now.

Fighting the Brigantes for Cartimandua may not seem like much of a sacrifice for the Roman army, who are popularly perceived as being an unbeatable, unstoppable force against the unarmoured, undisciplined barbarian hordes, but the armies of the British kingdoms were not undisciplined or bad at war. Julius Caesar stressed that they fought in a manner that disconcerted his troops: 'they [the Britons] generally retreated even designedly, and, when they had drawn off our men a short distance from the legions, leaped from their chariots and fought on foot in unequal (and to them advantageous) battle,' he grumped.[10] With these tactics, Britons saw off Julius Caesar and caused the subsequent Roman invaders several decades' worth of stress. Much later, about 100 CE, a general in the northern forts continued to complain that what he called 'the wretched Britons' had too many horses and their infantry had javelins and it was all too much. The Romans did not enjoy fighting the British.[11] At the same time that Nasica faced Venutius, a full legion had been defeated by the Silures in Wales, annoying the governor of Britain – Publius Ostorius Scapula – so much that he publicly and repeatedly announced his desire to genocide the entire kingdom.[12] News of that sentiment weirdly didn't endear him to the locals. Venutius too caused Nasica a lot of misery, inflicting several defeats before the Romans managed to drive him away from Cartimandua's kingdom. The mission to save and protect Cartimandua was an expensive and difficult one and came at real cost to the Romans. Cartimandua's importance to the Romans in Britain drove this.

For several years after this, we lose track of Cartimandua except for the fact that she ruled her kingdom in relative peace and tranquillity, holding the northern line for the Romans. Some think that she and Venutius reunited, but personally I think that is unlikely. What we do know is what she was not doing; she was not joining in the revolt against Roman power in 60 CE led by the flashy celebrity of British women, Boudicca.

Boudicca, to Tacitus, is the anti-Cartimandua. Before 60 CE, Boudicca lived as the wife of Prasutagus, the ruler of the Iceni kingdom, in what is now Essex and Norfolk in the east of England. According to Tacitus, the couple had two daughters.

The Iceni pledged loyalty and allegiance to the Romans and functioned as a client state, much like the Brigantes, under Prasutagus. He may have even surrendered alongside Cartimandua to Claudius in person. The Iceni tootled along fairly happily as a client state, watching the Romans build their towns and temples around them, including the big towns now known as London, St Albans and Colchester (then Londinium, Verulamium and Camulodunum), keeping themselves to themselves, or so the archaeology suggests.[13]

In 60 BCE, several things changed. First, Prasutagus died and, according to Tacitus who might be lying, gave part of his property and kingdom away to the emperor Nero. The Roman leaders in the area decided to take the whole kingdom, lashed Boudicca when she resisted and raped her daughters. This is the only reason given by Tacitus for Boudicca's revolt, and it bears more than a slight resemblance to Livy's account of the rape of Lucretia. The Romans, who impose slavery and death upon the free Britons, overstep their already tyrannical power through the sexual assault of free, virginal women and this provides the impetus for one brave, pure defender of freedom to step forward and attempt to overthrow the monster that rules them.[14] Another, much later source, however, offers a different set of more plausible reasons less tied to a literary theme of freedom. Cassius Dio, writing in about 220 CE, notes that the Iceni and their neighbouring kingdoms had been doubly fucked by Roman financial dealings at the same time. First, governor Catus Decianus recalled a huge number of financial gifts given to British leaders by Claudius to win them over, suddenly declaring them to be loans rather than gifts now that Claudius was no longer around to disagree.† This upset people who suddenly found themselves in debt, and then Seneca, as was his wont, made it worse. Seneca was a Stoic philosopher who also acted as the teenage emperor Nero's adviser. When Claudius invaded Britain, Seneca had taken the opportunity to act as a bank for the new British subjects. Part of the joy of becoming a Roman subject was that you suddenly had to build loads of Roman stuff, like temples and theatres, out of your own pocket. Seneca stepped in to lend communities and individuals the cash to do this and then, all of a sudden, possibly seeing Britain as a lost cause, he called in the entire loan of forty million *sesterces*. In full. With 'severe penalties' for anyone who failed to cough up.[15] He was basically a loan shark who wrote philosophy on the side. Anyway. Dio makes no mention of any rapes because they didn't happen.

If we kindly assume that there is a kernel of truth in Tacitus's account, then we can assume that a series of blows hit the Iceni hard, with the loss of their king, some kind of brutally handled Roman seizure of Iceni property and the recall of two sets of massive loans they probably couldn't pay. These events revealed to the Iceni and Boudicca that the Romans were not the benevolent pals they had once presented themselves as, with their money and their loans and their fancy wine. They were, in fact, a brutal empire, here to take as much as they could get. And Boudicca kicked off. She gathered an army, creating a coalition of forces from several kingdoms in eastern and southern England and proceeded to fight the Romans and attempt to drive them out of her island. First, she attacked Colchester, the site of a brand new temple to the Deified Claudius and poorly defended because the Romans were spread thin by a number of battles and revolts happening across the country in response to the financial crisis and the Roman attempt to wipe out Druids. They burned the new temple to the ground, prompting the Romans to send a full legion to deal with them. To prove the point that the British fighters were not unwashed, blue-faced idiots running naked through fields, the Iceni-led coalition obliterated Legio IX.

Thrilled, and now with even more followers who saw Boudicca as leading something genuinely successful, Boudicca's army continued to attack and sack St Albans and London. Tacitus emphasises that these attacks, while successful, were brutal. Whether they were actually more brutal than a Roman city sacking is up for debate, but Tacitus is particularly horrified by the fact that Boudicca didn't take any of her prisoners into slavery (he chillingly calls this 'war commerce'). Instead, she massacred everyone and burned as much of these cities as she could. It is a classic trope of Roman literature that women go berserk when given any sort of power because they have an innate cruelty. Women with power over enslaved people beat them more than men, while women who are given power over armies go wild with bloodlust. Thus, Tacitus and Dio both give us a Boudicca who kills and kills and tortures and kills. At his most extreme, Dio claims that Boudicca cut the breasts off Roman women and sewed them to their mouths before killing them, which is nonsensical and time-consuming and fricking *weird.*[16] These victories forced Paulinus Suetonius, the head Roman in Britain, to stop genociding Druids in Anglesey and race to intercept Boudicca's army with his.

It is here that Boudicca really enters the modern imagination as a glory of Britain in scenes now depicted in bronze in the middle of London. Although England also has statues to her foe Paulinus (because England has a very, very conflicted relationship with Romans), the better-known monument is Thomas Thornycroft's 1902 statue of Boudicca. Boudicca stands in a two-wheeled chariot, arms out as if commanding a crowd, holding a spear and wearing a crown while her two daughters, topless for reasons it's best not to dwell on, cower behind her imposing presence. This image is derived from scenes described by both Tacitus and Dio where Boudicca gives a dramatic *Braveheart*-style speech before her final battle. In Tacitus's account, Boudicca again mirrors Livy's Lucretia. She rides along her battle lines, showing each group her lash marks and displaying her cowering daughters as defiled and ruined: 'having been deprived of her liberty, her body marked by lashings, the chastity of her daughters stolen. The lusts of the Romans had gone so far that neither bodies nor age, nor virginities remained unstained.'[17] Powerful stuff, written for a Roman audience who would recognise the tropes of the female body as a place where tyranny is enacted and the image of the displayed, defiled female body as a catalyst for righteous war. But it is Dio who provides the really strong stuff, told in his own way.

While Tacitus's Boudicca is an imperial-era Lucretia and barbarian Brutus rolled into one, Dio's Boudicca is just a monster to the Roman eye. Her success is less a display of her righteousness to Dio than a demonstration of the failures of governance in Britain. In Dio's view, a properly run province wouldn't have allowed a barbarian woman to even make it to St Albans. Dio offers us a rare physical description of an ancient woman, in order to really freak his readers out. I imagine his readers reacting as I did when watching French body horror film *Titane* (2021): squirming and covering their faces and gasping in delicious horror. He says '[h]er body was extremely large and most ferocious' and if you can tell me what a 'ferocious' body is, please drop me a line. 'Her gaze was most terrifying, possessing a rough voice with voluminous yellowish hair down to her hips … she had also taken a spear so that she could use it too, to strike universal awe.'[18] If you've blinked a little at 'yellowish' rather than red hair, that's normal. Boudicca's hair was changed to red during the Tudor period when poets decided it would be a good idea to align her with famous redhead Queen Elizabeth I.[19] This Boudicca is the opposite of an ideal free Roman woman, with her long hair uncontrolled and flowing and her massive, freakish body and voice. She is literally larger than life

and rejecting all the norms of Roman womanhood to the extent that, to Dio's readers, she is barely a woman at all. Dio then gives Boudicca a big, long speech in which she exhorts her followers to escape their own slavery, represented in Dio by taxes rather than physical violence, suggesting he doesn't take her complaints about being oppressed very seriously. She then completes the scene by opening her dress and letting a hare run out of it, in a ritual that the Romans were expected to find utterly bizarre.[20]

Boudicca held her last stand at the Battle of Watling Street, of unknown location, where she was routed by superior Roman tactics. Our two accounts differ on Boudicca's fate. In Dio, she dies of a 'mysterious illness' and is lavishly mourned by her followers. Without her as a figurehead, he says, the entire revolt dispersed.[21] Tacitus, however, says that Boudicca took her own life with poison.[22] This is interesting because this kind of suicide was considered by the Romans to be a manifestation of honour and bravery. For Tacitus to give a female non-Roman this ending is to give her a great compliment, and this is the core of Tacitus's depiction of both Boudicca and Cartimandua. They are two sides of the same story being told by Tacitus. His *Annals* are a narrative of the Julio-Claudian dynasty from Tiberius to Nero, describing the decline of the Roman Empire from a free and honourable state where men were men and women were women and everyone (within a very narrow boundary) had a shot at being consul, into corruption, decadence, immorality and what he calls slavery. A very free, very rich man who is a member of the tippiest toppiest tip-top elite of the whole empire and who actually owned other people describing his own life as slavery while *owning other people as property* is genuinely unbearable but it was his thing so we have to put up with it. Women, as we have seen, were always useful metaphors for themes of slavery, freedom and political changes in Roman literature and so that is the role that Boudicca and Cartimandua play in the *Annals* while Britain plays the role of the whole empire.

On the one side, we have Boudicca. Our British Lucretia. She is abused and treated as one would treat a slave, humiliated and publicly lashed (telling us a lot about how Romans treated the people they actually enslaved in their 'war commerce'). So, she rises up and fights her tyrannical oppressors in order to defend her freedom to live her life without being assaulted. She is successful because she is righteous, her war is just, and because the Romans have become soft and decadent in their tyranny. Her defeat comes because, in the end, women can't be trusted to lead armies and they will make stupid mistakes due to their silly female brains, but she does not lose her honour or her courage or her righteousness and so, like the Lucretia she is modelled on, she takes her own life.

On the other side stands Cartimandua, who represents everything decadent, base and wicked about the empire. She is repeatedly called a queen, the only thing worse than a king to the Roman imagination, because a female monarch is pure nightmare fuel. She immediately capitulates to Claudius, a weak man loathed by Tacitus, thus giving herself over to his version of slavery. Then, she uses feminine tricks and treachery – classic lady behaviour – to capture and betray the one man fighting for British freedom in order to ingratiate herself with her new Mediterranean masters. Tacitus has a bit of a crush on Caratacus, who he depicts as the ultimate Noble Savage, all plain speaking and brilliantly simple tactics and being closer to the natural state of man et cetera, et cetera. Cartimandua, the scheming lady ruler, is an ideal foil. If Boudicca is Tacitus's Lucretia, Cartimandua is Tacitus's Semiramis, a mythical Babylonian queen who stood as the pinnacle of scandalous rulers and the archetype of The Queen for Romans. She made herself

notorious, in legend, by seducing a king and killing him to become a queen. Once widowed again, she took to seducing the most handsome of her soldiers in the gardens of Babylon and then killing them once she'd finished with them.[23] She was also famous for her unfeminine military ambition, and constant Odysseus-style trickery. You can see the parallels. Like Semiramis, Cartimandua was not even a good wife. She drove away her husband and made him hate her so much he started a war against her. Twice.

The second of Venutius's wars against Cartimandua came in 69 CE, almost a decade after Boudicca's revolt. Cartimandua had watched the revolt from afar without intervening in any way. She was probably rooting very hard for the Romans, who had become indispensable to her and her power. The whole revolt happened far to the south of her kingdom so she was able to look the other way, remain quiet and stay out of trouble. We don't know where Venutius was during this revolt and the whole decade, but in 69 CE he popped up again to have another go at kicking his ex-wife off the throne and taking over Brigantia. In 68 CE, the emperor Nero was overthrown by an uprising of legions in Spain and killed himself. This sparked an eighteen-month-long civil war where four people declared themselves emperor and slaughtered each other. In the latter part of this war, the two duking it out for the ultimate prize were Vitellius and Vespasian, both of whom had spent parts of their careers in the British legions and both of whom had strong supporters left in Britain. Although the actual war took place in mainland Europe, the British legions became divided over where to give their support and took their eye off the British ball. Venutius saw his chance in the squabbling Romans and went powering back into Brigantia to have another go at his ex, hoping that the Romans would be too distracted to care and he could take Brigantia back for the Brigantes. Get rid of these European interlopers and give £350 million a year to the NHS. This is, importantly, not how Tacitus describes the war. He says that Cartimandua committed adultery by taking a new consort, and (metaphorically) stabbed Venutius right in the back because this new consort was Venutius's ex-bodyguard.[24] The melodrama!

In Tacitus's telling, Cartimandua was attacked not because she was leading a huge client kingdom while her ex objected ideologically, but because she was a luxurious Jezebel who abandoned her good, brave, long-suffering husband for some fresh dick. She also had a savage nature apparently, though Tacitus declines to elaborate further on that. He does say that when Venutius turned up with his army and another fifteen years' experience fighting the Romans under his belt, Cartimandua's subjects joined his side, which might be revealing. Maybe she was a bad ruler, maybe her people had got fed up with the Roman boot on their neck. As inhabitants of a client kingdom, they were subject to Roman taxes, funding the army keeping them in line. Romans made their subjects pay to be subjects. Being a client kingdom was generally better than being totally absorbed into the empire, with much lower rates of being murdered and enslaved, but it wasn't as good as being totally free and the primary beneficiaries were the rulers. Venutius, who had been leading his own rebel alliance against the empire for almost two decades, could potentially make a good case that he was the man who could give them back their 'freedom'. And so, Cartimandua's people turned against her.

She might have died at this point, victim of a local uprising, if not for her ongoing importance to the Romans, who still needed a friend on the border. At the first sign of her being in danger, she sent messengers to the nearest Romans and they sent both infantry and cavalry units to back her up. The war over the Brigantian throne, and its future, raged for a while, with Venutius having the upper

hand for almost all of it. With a smaller force than in the first war, and divided attentions, the Romans were eventually forced to retreat from Brigantia. But they took Cartimandua with them.[25] Some have interpreted this action as the Romans removing a leader who had lost the support of her people in order to restore some short-term stability in the area, while others have interpreted it as the Romans rescuing a damsel in distress. To which I say, why not both! It made sense on both a pragmatic and an honourable level to get Cartimandua out of a kingdom that had turned against her.

We don't know what happened to Cartimandua after her deposition. It was not uncommon for fallen leaders from all over the empire to end up in Rome or another Italian city, as had happened to Caratacus. You'll hopefully remember that Caratacus had been taken as a prisoner to Rome, paraded in a Triumph and presented to the Roman people as a captured barbarian. According to Tacitus, at the end of his humiliating parade, Caratacus had stood bold and unbowed and given a big speech to Claudius and his wife Agrippina, lavishly praising the city of Rome, defending his refusal to submit to Roman power with the brilliant line 'For if you would rule the world, does it follow that the world must welcome servitude?' and presenting himself as an opportunity for Claudius to display great clemency. Astonishingly, this worked and Caratacus's death penalty was commuted to a life living in Rome with his wife and children.[26] Thus, it's not *impossible* that Cartimandua ended up in an Odd Couple sitcom situation living in the same city as the man she condemned to death by Romans. Imagine the dinner parties.

Without her, however, the Brigantes were no longer protected from the worst of Roman greed. With Venutius in charge, the kingdom stopped being Rome's ally and became its enemy, moving its border of control south quite significantly. This could not stand. Romans did not *do* losses. Venutius got about two years out of his reign, until the Roman political situation settled down a bit and the new emperor, Vespasian, could fling some heavy troops at him. In 71 CE, Petilius Cerialis led a full invasion of Brigantia and, though the battles were hard won, he outright conquered a large swathe of the territory, reducing the once huge and powerful kingdom, who could call in the Romans to do their bidding, into a sad little nub. I am not one who believes in the generally facile argument that the world would be a better place if it were run by women. As Boudicca alone shows, women are not innately nurturing peace-makers. But Cartimandua certainly made the experience of the Roman Empire a little easier for her subjects than her husband did.

What we know of both Boudicca and Cartimandua now tells us much more about the literary interests of some Roman guys than of these two living women who experienced the Roman Empire in two very different ways. Through the lens of Tacitus (and Dio, to an extent) Cartimandua and Boudicca are the Madonna/Whore of the Roman-British world. One, the violated mother fighting for her babies and her freedom; the other the violating cheating liar, cringing in servitude. One is lashed and defiled in public against her modest will, the other gives her body in adultery to a lowly guard. One is noble and free in mind and spirit, the other gives herself in slavery in exchange for wealth and filthy monarchical power. This comparison is not one of Tacitus's more subtle moments. But once again in Roman written history, female bodies are used as things to be looked at through the eyes of men in order to enable men's abstract discussions about imperialism, decadence, freedom and purity. The ways in which these women actually existed in the world was of no interest to them.

Boudicca will always be the face of early Roman Britain; she is simply too cool not to be. But Cartimandua offers a completely different and unique look at how

female rulers who came into contact with the Roman Empire could survive and, if they didn't have challenging ex-husbands, thrive. Cartimandua ruled the Brigantes for at least eighteen years, and up to twenty-six. She successfully kept the Romans out of the whole of northern England for her entire reign and took them for all she could get. She not only maintained her power in the north, but she also increased it through her co-operation. When she saw the Romans rampaging up the country like a rolling cloud of blood and nightmares, she took stock and made the decision to keep her kingdom safe and intact and a favourite of the empire. When Claudius died and was (hilariously) deified, someone wrote a satire about him arriving in the heavens to take his place among the gods while all the proper gods mock and ridicule him as unworthy. It ends with the emperor Caligula, Claudius's nephew, appearing and putting a leash on Claudius. It's called the Pumpkinification of Claudius, a joke that doesn't make sense in English. In the middle, Claudius's funeral dirge is quoted sarcastically, listing his accomplishments including his conquest of Britain. It goes like this:

> And the Britons beyond in their unknown seas, Blue-shielded Brigantians too, all these He chained by the neck as the Romans' slaves.[27]

This may not seem like much, but this is a name check for the Brigantes in a popular Roman satire for Roman audiences who apparently know the Brigantes above all other British kingdoms. In Roman eyes, the Brigantes and Cartimandua (incidentally, her name can be translated as 'sleek pony') were important, known and acknowledged above all the other kingdoms.[28] To do this, Cartimandua had to sacrifice a peer, had to accept opprobrium, and lose her husband, but it worked.

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† Claudius died in 59 CE, poisoned by his own wife. I told you they didn't like him.

Julia Felix

79 CE

The Pompeii Businesswoman

In 79 CE, an entire city disappeared. It began with rumbles from the mountain which had, for generations, provided the inhabitants of southern Italy with the fertile soil that attracted settlers and fed the cities around. The rumbles grew and grew until they were shaking the sea itself. The earthquake sucked the water out of the Bay of Naples and left the creatures who lived there wriggling, dying, on the exposed sand. And then came the eruption. The whole world exploded. A dark cloud rose into the sky and blotted out the sun. Only the flames leaping from the top of Vesuvius broke the darkness. And then the ash began to fall. Thick and burning hot, filling the lungs and settling in hair and eyelashes and clothes. With the ash came hot rocks bouncing off walls and floors and heads, forcing people to tie pillows to their heads as they fled.

Burning blackness rained from the sky, the earth shook wildly, formerly solid buildings swayed like skydancers and rocks smashed everything they hit. As the ash piled up to the knees, people began to flee. Many – too many – failed. They fell to the ground or curled up under tables. They were hit by rocks or falling buildings, they were suffocated by the relentless ash. The great natural historian and delightful oddball Pliny the Elder suffered that last fate. He saw the eruption occurring and sailed to get a closer look and never made it home. He inhaled too much smoke and ash and died while trying to escape.[1]

His nephew, Pliny the Younger, fled with his mother from Misenum. Misenum (now Miseno) sits on the opposite side of the Bay of Naples from Pompeii, over twenty-one miles from Vesuvius as the crow flies, and it received a fraction of the horror inflicted on the city at the foot of the mountain. Pliny the Younger survived to write about his experience: the descending cloud of ash enveloping the whole bay in a blinding darkness ‘as if the lamps had been put out in a completely closed room’, the tremors that made escape by any wheeled vehicle impossible over the undulating roads, the screaming that overwhelmed everything.[2] Fleeing people lost their children, husbands, parents in the dark chaos and cried out for one another. Some fell and were trampled. They wept, they prayed. They begged the gods for help and for death. Some cried that the world had ended, the gods had left them. They ran blindly. Pliny and his mother lay down to rest but over and over they had to stand up as the weight of the accumulating ash threatened to crush them. ‘I could boast that I never expressed any fear at this time,’ Pliny later wrote to his friend (and ours) Tacitus, ‘but I was only kept going by the consolation that the whole world was perishing with me.’[3]

The ash fell and fell and fell over Pompeii until the whole city, a rich, glittering, bustling, full city, was swallowed by the earth and vanished. So far, in the excavated sections of the city, over a thousand bodies have been found preserved in the pyroclastic flow but the true number of the dead is inestimable. In 79 CE, and for a long time afterwards, the destruction of Pompeii and the neighbouring town of Herculaneum was a tragedy beyond imagining. But tragedy gradually erodes and,

as centuries pass, the total burial of an entire Roman city under the preserving cloak of soft ash became a miracle. For Roman historians and archaeologists, at least.

Until this point, you and I, dear reader, have looked only at women who survived in the literary sources, who made an impression on men who wrote the kind of texts which survive thousands of years. As a result, these women have mostly been blue bloods and royals living in Rome itself. It is time then to turn to different sources and look at some women who made no impact on the literary world but left their impression in the material one, uncovered through diligent archaeology. The women in this chapter and the next are people who lived and died in relative anonymity, average women who became special because of what survives of them. The marks they left on the archaeological record of the Roman Empire shed light on aspects of Roman life otherwise left in total darkness and add new contours to our understanding of women living and working in the Roman world.

The excavations at Pompeii have been going on since the 1700s and have revealed a world and lives previously thought wholly lost. Pompeii became frozen in time, with bread abandoned on dining tables, sewer grates left open, dogs tied to posts and work half-finished. One of the most remarkable and wonderful places perfectly preserved by Vesuvius in Pompeii was discovered by a farmer in 1755: the multipurpose entertainment and dining complex in the area known as Regio II owned and operated by the one and only Julia Felix.[4]

Here's what we know about Julia Felix: she lived in Pompeii from at least 62 CE. She was possibly illegitimate but was definitely not a member of the social and cultural elite. She worked for a living setting up and running a very interesting business and, by 79 CE, she had planned to shift her focus from managing a business to owning property. We know all these things because twentieth-century excavations at her business uncovered an advert, carved in stone and attached to the external wall of her huge building. It reads:

> To rent for the period of five years from the thirteenth day of next August to the thirteenth day of the sixth August, the Venus Bath fitted for the *nogentium*, shops with living quarters over the shops, apartments on the second floor located in the building of Julia Felix, daughter of Spurius. At the end of five years, the agreement is terminated.[5]

This find illuminated the building it was attached to, bringing what otherwise looked like a very large anonymous domestic house into dazzling focus.[6] With this description of the purpose of each room written by the owner herself, archaeologists and historians could see the site through a whole new lens and they realised that they had discovered a Roman entertainment space for the working middle classes. It is, so far, a completely unique find and it is magnificent. It offers us, as modern viewers, two amazing things: a little glimpse into the lives of the commercial classes of the Roman Empire who are so often completely and utterly invisible, and a brutal reminder that so much of what we 'know' about Roman women in the Roman world comes from rules concerning only the most elite.

We'll do that second part first, because it's the least fun. Roman written and legal sources are pretty universal in their agreement that although women could own property, they could not control it; they had no legal rights, could not make contracts and were to be treated as minors by the legal system for their entire lives. In order to buy or sell property, engage in business, do anything in a court room, etc., women required a male guardian to oversee and sign off on any transactions.

This is a basic truism of women in the Roman Empire, repeated *ad nauseum* by sources both ancient and modern including me, and it is undermined by Julia Felix's rental notice. The rental ad makes it pretty clear that Julia Felix is the owner-operator of a business complex including public baths, shops and apartments (there's more too, as we'll see), and she doesn't seem to require anyone else to help her rent it out. She names her father – sort of; 'Spurius' might just mean that she is illegitimate – but this is effectively a surname, a personal identifier to differentiate her from other Julia Felixes in the area. It doesn't mean her father was involved. Furthermore, the use of her father's name as an identifier suggests that Julia didn't have a husband and was either unmarried or widowed in 79 CE. The strong implication of her advert is that Julia Felix was an independent lady, a honey making money and a momma profiting dollars who could truthfully throw her hands up to Destiny's Child.

Now it might be that the presence of a guardian was so embedded in the process of female business ownership that it didn't need to be stated, or that it was a formality that wasn't a concern. But it might also be that the restrictions on female engagement with property and legal powers were largely the concern of the aristocratic classes and that the lower classes, aka the vast majority of people, simply didn't worry about them. Almost all of the surviving textual evidence around these issues refers to aristocrats in Rome, huge ancient families with enormous estates and specific codes of conduct which exist to separate them from the hoi polloi.[†] Just as the modern UK maintains a significant aristocratic class of thousand-year-old families with ties to William the Conqueror and vast crumbling estates and their own behaviours serving their unique interests. The British aristocracy talk with their own specific accent, and genuinely do sound like they are trying to speak while neither swallowing nor spitting the four plum pits they are holding in their cheeks. They have their own dialect, defined by Nancy Mitford as U and Non-U (upper class and non-upper class). They have their own rituals, their titles to worry about, their own social rules about gender and marriage and children. They exist in a different world to the rest of us. And I see no reason why the Roman aristocracy didn't exist in their own ruling bubble, while everyone else dealt with the world on completely different terms. One of whom was Julia Felix, doing it for herself.

But what, you might be wondering, was she actually doing? Well, let us take a tour through the *Praedia* (estate) of Julia Felix and have a look. First, the wide view: from the air, Julia's complex ran for an entire city block. Within its walls it contains almost six thousand square metres of space. This isn't how it was originally built. The excavations have shown that Julia's complex began life as two separate lots, possibly owned by two separate people and separated by a road. In 62 CE, however, an earthquake hit Pompeii (Vesuvius revving her engines, presumably), causing a lot of damage and prompting a lot of what we might call regeneration work around the city. In particular, damage and road closures drove a lot of foot traffic into new areas. Suddenly, the Via dell'Abbondanza transformed from a quietish residential street into a primary artery to and from the amphitheatre. Entrepreneurs abhor a money-making vacuum like that and Julia was nothing if not an entrepreneur. So she leapt on it. She spotted a big domestic home owned by someone with real cash containing a pretty garden and a really good-sized bath complex up for sale in the aftermath of the earthquake and she had an idea. She purchased both lots and combined them, then persuaded the city's *aediles* to completely remove the road that divided them.[7] This is our first sign that Julia was canny. She expanded two average-sized plots into the largest plot so far found in

Pompeii, and transformed it into an oasis of pleasure.

Zooming in, let's walk down the Via dell'Abbondanza, past all the food shops and wine bars, past the three stone benches lining the road filled with people talking, arguing, laughing, writing on the walls and playing word games, and peep into the first doorway. At first look, Julia's premises are standard. An L-shaped bar stands to your left. Sunk into the counter are amphorae of wine, meats and treats. The ceiling stretches high, with a mezzanine level where perhaps the barman lives. Off to your left, a separate room with built-in booths is full of more people eating, drinking, giggling, discussing the tactics of the Green Team at the races. But let's keep going, two more steps down the road and we shall walk through the formal entrance. Step into the courtyard, colonnaded and lavishly decorated. Pegasus soars and rampant panthers roar from the walls. A little window into the tavern means you can order takeaway if you fancy, but we'll keep going into the changing room to drop our tunics off on the shelves provided (all items left at your own risk), pop our bath slippers on and slip into the swimming pool. From the pool, we can wander through the *frigidarium* (cold room), *tepidarium* (warm room) and *caldarium* (hot room). We can even take a spin in the tiny but well-fitted circular *laconium* (steam room). If we stay too long, or drink too much, we can pop to the loos where up to nine other people might be relieving themselves. These are the baths described by Julia as 'fitted for the *nogentium*', an obscure term meaning something like the well-off, or the well-heeled. A little like a letting agent might describe a not vile apartment as 'stunning', Julia advertised her baths as being better than the rest. She wasn't wrong – and not just because there was absolutely no competition for public baths in her area. Her baths were genuinely lovely. Each room had big windows with gorgeous views of her curated gardens and were painted beautifully. Even the loos were pretty. The whole complex was an idyll in the city. These weren't your basic Holiday Inn baths, for a quick scrub and sweat, these were places to linger and enjoy and pamper yourself.

As you lie in the *caldarium*, sweating, you can look out on Julia's gardens and really marvel. These are what Julia's place is really known for. The garden is big for a city garden and Julia landscaped it to perfection. Along the centre runs a mini canal, deep and marble-rimmed and probably full of little fishes swimming along, and the sounds of the water running through it are soothing and calming compared to the hubbub on the street outside. Four adorable wee bridges cross the canal, pretty, delicate, fluted columns support the colonnade, and statues are dotted around along with the landscaped flowerbeds to encourage a gentle stroll in the afternoon down to the altar of Isis at the back. They suggest a space of leisure and calm. A space to escape for a moment and admire the art. This is the kind of space that the wealthy – the Ciceros and Clodias and Turias of the world – own for themselves. They own several. They can walk in their private gardens every day and dip their toe in the cool water of their personal fish ponds. For the majority of urban Romans, however, gardens were something to be visited and were full of other people. Public parks were lovely, but you only need to be hit in the face with someone's *harpastum* ball once to remember that there are a lot of other people there too.[†] And sometimes, if you had a little money, you might like to escape to somewhere small and colonnaded and relatively private. Julia's garden offered her clients this little extravagance.

If you were feeling very fancy, like you were really splashing out, you could stay for dinner in Julia's extraordinarily ornate and wonderful dining room. This little room offered an amazing and intimate space for a luxe dinner. It opened out onto the garden, with an indoor–outdoor feel, and a big barrel-vaulted ceiling had

been deliberately roughed up and painted to look and feel like real rock so that diners could feel that they were inside a secret grotto by the sea. This was a proper dining room for proper, upper-class formal dining so there were no chairs. Instead, a wide couch was built into each wall, faced with genuine marble, and on these diners reclined on their sides, snuggled in close together, propped up on their left arms and reaching for each delicious bite with their right. They are long disappeared now but, in 79 CE when diners lay down for dinner, the couches were piled high with mattresses and pillows for comfort. While ordinary diners at the bar outside sat at tables and benches, eating bowls of stew, back here dining parties lounged, luxuriated and nibbled on dainty dormouse bites brought to them by waiters on elegant tables. The real star of the dining room though was the decor. The walls were painted a rich azure blue and decorated with 'exotic' scenes of an imagined Africa. Pygmies and wild animals frolicked across the walls as the blue rippled with the movement of the water feature. Because yes, the room had a water feature. At the back of the dining room was a mini waterfall, where a stream cascaded gently down little marble steps, ran underneath the central floor and then emerged as a fountain in the middle of the room between the couches. It was playful and pointlessly extravagant and totally delightful. It made the room sparkle and glisten as enslaved waiters brought course after course of roasted meat and fruit and cheese to sample. It gave Julia's customers a little taste of what real elite living was like.

The strongest evidence that people came to Julia's to experience a little luxury is the lengths Julia went to in hiding the workings of the complex. The open areas she kept very open. Every part of the public space ran into the rest, connected by open doors and big windows. The spaces for customers were wanderable and expansive. But behind the dining room and the colonnade ran a warren of a serving corridor, where enslaved people and people Julia hired ran back and forth with towels and brooms and tables and dishes. This was where the work of running a luxury estate was really done. Like all the best stately homes and grand houses with their back doors and servants' stairs, Julia shaped her complex to make the expensive look effortless and to make the graft that kept it luxurious invisible. She created a space where people with a little money could go to pretend to be really wealthy for half a day, and this included protecting them from the embarrassment of being confronted by labour.

We can guess who Julia might have attracted to her entertainment space by the most unique and striking of Julia's decorations. Most of the public complex was decorated with fairly standard paintings and friezes in what is known as the Fourth Style – lots of bold panels of colour and intricate miniatures. But in the atrium of the complex ran a twenty-five-metre-long frieze of an entirely unique and wonderful subject: Pompeii's Forum on market day. This frieze was one of the first things excavated in 1755, at which point large sections of it promptly disappeared and others were – agonisingly – cut down by the Bourbon king Charles (being King Charles VII of Naples and Charles III of Spain) so they could fit on the walls of his palace at Portici.[8] The bits he didn't use were apparently just – try not to vomit in horror – thrown away. The eleven metres that survived in sixteen fragments can now be seen in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples but their haphazard excavation and treatment means that they are effectively fading away before our eyes.[9] Thankfully, some eighteenth-century engravings exist so some of what has been lost in the past 250 years can be sort of seen, but the situation is a real heartbreaker because what Julia chose to depict on her atrium was a recognisable, only slightly idealised snapshot of Pompeian men, women and children going about

their business. No gods, no monsters, no exotic beasts or grand military campaigns. No nymphs or satyrs or any of the traditional scenes of Roman art. Just a freakishly real-looking portrait of Pompeian commercial life.

The first thing that strikes a modern viewer looking at the frieze is the explosions of colour. Even faded, it is as bright and vibrant as a children's party. Almost every figure is dressed in a loud colour, from red to green to orange to yellow. There are no white togas and white columns here. People wear green tunics with red cloaks like Christmas elves in fancy dress. The next thing to notice is the shopping. The surviving sections focus strongly on shopping as an activity, presumably showing travelling merchants and traders on a market day dealing with their customers.[10] We can see a cloth seller encouraging two female customers to touch and feel the fabrics he is selling, while nearby a guy displays his DIY tools for sale. On his table are hammers, pincers and pliers.[11] We see shoemakers and cobblers making and repairing shoes, two guys making and selling metal pots, a baker, a greengrocer and a man selling hot food. Customers are haggling, watching, touching, buying and trying to get the attention of the merchant who is ignoring them. This is commercial life in the centre of Pompeii.

Then, you start to focus in on what everyone else is doing. Here a class of young boys is being taught and one of them is being flogged for some misbehaviour. His bare butt is out, he is being restrained by two larger boys, and behind him a man is bringing the whip down hard. Truly a deranged scene to paint on the wall of a leisure facility, but powerfully Roman and probably a horribly common sight. Another flogging is shown on a different fragment, where a naked boy cowers from the hand of a woman striking him. Over here, a man with a straggly beard and torn clothes and a dog on a string is taking something – a coin – from a well-dressed woman and her daughter. A man sits and sketches a statue, with his sketch on his knees, a woman leans down to pick up her child, three men stand and read the public notices pasted on a noticeboard, two children play at the base of a column, a man leads a bull across the courtyard, three women sit in a semi-circle listening to the sales pitch of a shoe salesman; one holds a naked infant on her lap. In a corner, a little girl holds a tablet to her chest while a woman speaks, gesturing both to the girl and to two men seated on a bench. One of the men is gesturing in return. This could be a petition being presented to some magistrates, or an argument, or even negotiations over the sale of the girl.[12] Still more people are simply milling about chatting, holding bottles of wine, admiring the many statues, patting the horses. There are a lot of horses, two of which, in the eighteenth-century engraving at least, appear to have truly enormous erect penises. Like eye-catchingly and distractingly massive. Absolutely-could-not-miss-them-if-they-were-on-your-wall huge horse dicks.[†]

Horse wangs aside, the overall frieze feels like a faded photograph of Pompeii in action, but specifically its commercial class. The buyers and sellers and hagglers of Pompeii. There are no magistrates or elites with retinues in this picture, and there are perhaps only two or three enslaved or very poor people, one of whom is the beggar with his dog. What we see represented is mostly the lower middle class. The class of people who wanted to educate their sons but couldn't afford to have private tutors, who couldn't show their benefaction by giving a whole building or statue to a city but could give a few *sesterces* to the starving. These are people who could afford to buy cloth new but not the time to weave their own, who owned enslaved people but just a few domestics. The kind of people who couldn't live in a big *domus* with a garden and an army of enslaved people to feed and dress and pamper them but could maybe afford to treat themselves once in a while. Who might want

to buy, for one night only, the experience of being rich in the Roman Empire. It might be that Julia's Forum frieze is a mirror held up for the middle classes of Pompeii to see themselves and feel visible and meaningful and worthy of a piece of art in the one place where they came to feel special.[13]

If that is what the Forum frieze aimed to do then Julia Felix was a commercial genius. Where she worked to keep the necessary labour of luxury invisible from her customers, she also put a lot of money and effort into making the generally invisible visible. The day-to-day commercial life of any city is rarely considered to be a worthy subject for art, for gazing on. If that's what Julia Felix did with the house she bought and renovated into an entertainment space to make her guests feel valid and seen and welcome in a traditional *domus*, then she was brilliant.

But what of her own space? Tucked away at the very back of the garden, behind a single locked door, sat a small house not included in the rental advert which was, presumably, where Julia herself lived. It could be accessed only via a single door and some stairs to the upstairs rental flats, so this was a very private space, away from the clientele. And it was nice. At its centre sat a little Tuscan atrium, rectangular with a wee pool in the centre but open and containing no columns. Nine or ten rooms led off from the atrium, including a formal dining room with built-in stone couches and a room that appeared to be a little office – a *tablinum* – for Julia to work in.[14] The decor in the office was striking: lots of very realistic still-life paintings of everyday objects relating to business and food covered the walls. One showed some shelves holding wax tablets, a roll of papyrus, ink pots and a stylus. Another showed piles of coins next to a leather purse. On another wall, a fresco depicted a bowl full of ten fresh eggs sitting on a table next to a jug and a bucket with a ladle, all made of silver. Above these hung four dead partridges and a fringed tea towel. It was a good tea towel. If these decorations existed in any other context, they'd be unremarkable. The naturalistic style of painting and mosaic was popular. But, in the context of what we know was Julia's business providing food in exchange for money at a high level and in her most private business space, it is so tempting to see them as a theme she specifically chose because of their importance to her. As I sit in my office, decorated with Roman prints, postcards, photos and a replica Roman pot because I spend my life thinking about Romans, it doesn't feel like a *huge* stretch to imagine Julia Felix filling her office with pictures related to her business.

The excavations at Julia Felix's property revealed a part of Roman life that had been unknown to historians previously. So much writing and thinking about the Roman world fixates upon the extreme aristocratic elite circles of the ruling class in Rome, or – in more recent years – on the very lowest in the Romans' food chain, the enslaved. They provide a useful contrast to one another, the very high and the very low. But in between these two extremes lived untold millions of workers, with a little money but never enough. People who worked in shops and ran small businesses. Their lives are perhaps the most uninteresting because they are the most mundane and familiar, but they made the empire run as they paid their taxes or didn't, supported an emperor or didn't, had riots in the amphitheatre and had their rented homes destroyed by earthquakes. The discovery that this class of people could want and be able to buy the experience of luxury for an evening or a weekend and that people like Julia developed businesses that catered to that desire opens up a whole new world of Roman experiences to imagine and think about. Julia's entrepreneurship, and her very well-timed (for us) decision to rent her place out shows us a whole side of the Roman Empire otherwise lost.

We will never know if Julia escaped the flames and choking ash of 79 CE, fleeing as it swallowed her business and her home, but one discovery, made on 28 January 1952, suggests that she didn't.[15] The archaeologists, led by Amedeo Maiuri, uncovered on that day the skeleton of a woman who had fallen while running across the garden during the disaster. It's clear this fallen woman was well off, because she was wearing a lot of gold jewellery. She carried four gold half-hoop earrings and wore four gold rings. Two of these rings were particularly expensive; both contained a red carnelian gem, one carved with a figure of Mercury, the other with an eagle. Around her neck she wore a necklace of gold filigree, dotted with ten pearls and hung with a green pendant. Someone stole both the necklace and earrings from the Pompeii Antiquarium in 1975 and no one, somehow, had ever bothered to photograph them so all we have are descriptions but the rings that survive are fine and expensive. The woman who wore them – was wearing them when she died – had real money to buy these objects and the woman who wore them did not leave Pompeii in time. Moreover, when she was found it was clear that at the moment of her death she was heading not towards the street or towards safety, but towards the shrine to Isis in the garden where all the most valuable possessions were kept. The valuable possessions that Julia Felix grafted for and maybe couldn't bear to leave behind. There's no way to tell whether this skeleton is Julia Felix, whether these bones once stood and looked at the plots of land Julia bought and made plans, or whether they belong to a looter or a chancer or someone just caught out. But it's nice to pretend that Julia Felix, who shaped the city's roads around her dream and offered respite and luxury to workers and made a tonne of money doing it, died and was buried with the place that still bears her name.

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† A certain type of person will be cracking their knuckles and readying themselves to send me a rude email explaining that 'the hoi polloi' is wrong *actually* because *hoi* in ancient Greek is already an article. These people are pedants who inexplicably care more about the correct use of ancient Greek than the readability of English sentences. They also hate split infinitives and sentences that end with prepositions because they love to pointlessly force English to abide by the rules of Latin. Language is a fluid, lovely thing which moves and changes every day and can't be restrained and the hoi polloi sounds as good as to boldly go. Sorry. Please don't email me.

† *Harpastum* was a Roman team sport played with a hard leather ball a little bigger than a tennis ball. It was, as you can probably guess, violent.

† Worth noting that Dr Sophie Hay thinks that these might have been a sneaky addition by the eighteenth-century engravers as they are definitely less obvious in the original painting, but the idea of an Italian engraver exaggerating the penises to such a huge extent might be even funnier.

Sulpicia Lepidina

100 CE

The First Lady of the Camp

From the ruins of Pompeii, we shall now travel through time and space to a place as far removed from sun-soaked idyll of the Bay of Naples as it is possible to imagine: northern England, where, like Julia Felix, another woman left behind some writing which changed the way that archaeological sites could be understood. Specifically, we are travelling to an archaeological dig in a small and largely unknown fort in the middle of a windswept nowhere on the northern edge of the Pennines in March 1973, where the days are very short and the rains are very frequent. Robin Birley, the director of excavations, while exploring a pit filled with ancient human excrement and animal bones (this story is exactly why I refused to do any archaeology, incidentally), pulled out two small slivers of wood squished together. When he gently separated them, he was astonished to find perfectly preserved writing on the inside.[1] Half buried in a deep trench in a poo hole, Robin Birley discovered the first of the Vindolanda tablets. Since that day, over six hundred tablets with writing have been excavated from the Vindolanda fort containing everything from food orders to notes on military engagements, and lots and lots of personal letters. Personal letters which had not been edited for publication (cough Cicero cough) and did not present Important Thoughts on Important Events. The Vindolanda tablets contain the letters that people sent to say hi, to send love, to ask a little favour, or to return one. Letters that people living in a Roman fort at the very northern edge of the empire sent to one another just as part of being alive and human and a part of a community. And amongst these, excavated in the 1990s, emerged the only example in the entire Roman Empire of a woman writing to a woman in Latin.

Let's zoom out a second. What the hell is a Vindolanda? As a result of Robin Birley's work, Vindolanda is one of the most important Roman sites in England. The Romans built it in 85 CE as a small fort in a chain of forts running along the northern border of the empire as it stood following the destruction of the Brigantes as a client kingdom and their absorption into the empire proper. Without a client queen to hold the border, the Romans needed forts and soldiers instead. Today, it sits just a couple of miles south of Hadrian's Wall (built in 122 CE) but for a long time this chain of forts represented the northernmost edge of Roman power. Vindolanda sits bang in the centre of the chain. It was not a huge fortress for a Roman legion, or the kind of place the governor ever visited. Emperors probably barely knew it existed. It functioned as a little cog in the vast and monstrous machinery of Roman military imperialism, one in a string of instruments of occupation and control left to intimidate the permanently fractious northern Britons and the permanently furious (and frightened) Scots beyond the border. Vindolanda was a military space, built by and for the Roman army in an active war zone. Such spaces are routinely depicted as places of hypermasculinity, big men hitting one another with swords and, I don't know, growling in a manly fashion. Whatever men imagine men do when left alone. The discovery of the letters at Vindolanda,

however, smashed that fantasy of an exclusively masculine space to pieces.

The letters and documents from Vindolanda that we are interested in date from around 95–115 CE.[2] Dissent within the British borders had mostly been crushed by Agricola, Tacitus's father-in-law and governor of Britain, between 77 and 85 CE. Agricola had been so successful in Britain that he had tried to invade both Scotland and Ireland. Neither mission could be called a huge success, partly because of Agricola's misconception that Ireland was the size of the Isle of Wight, but the attempts demonstrated that the Romans felt comfortable and confident in northern Britain for the first time. Part of Agricola's subjugation plan included crushing the Brigantes and colonising their territories, effectively wiping the whole kingdom out of existence. By 95 CE, the Pennines were thoroughly 'Romanised', or at least centred economically around the Roman army in Britain. And it's into this setting that Sulpicia Lepidina rode with her husband, Flavius Cerialis. She had come to live in the fort of Vindolanda as the first lady of the camp.

Despite her very Roman-sounding name, Sulpicia Lepidina was almost certainly not from the city of Rome. She may well have never even visited Italy, but by the end of the first century CE, the idea of Romanness had begun to diffuse away from the actual city. Lepidina's husband, Cerialis (whose name always makes me imagine him as Tony the Tiger), originated from Batavia, an island in the Rhine in the modern-day Netherlands.[3] The Batavians had a traditionally up and down relationship with the Romans, including at least one revolt, but had worked out a deal whereby they provided the Roman army with men and weapons instead of paying a tribute in cash. Flavius Cerialis was one of those men. At some point, either he or his father had been granted Roman citizenship by one of the Flavian emperors (Vespasian, Titus and Domitian), as evidenced by his family name Flavius, and he had been made prefect (leader) of an auxiliary *cohortes equitatae* of Batavian soldiers.

A *cohortes equitatae* consisted of 480 men, including 120 cavalry. Usually, they were led by a centurion of Roman birth, or at least from outside of their own ethnic group, but this cohort had been given the privilege of being commanded by one of their own. This is how the Romans ruled their empire: they took men and weapons from the places they conquered, trained them up in Roman military ways and moved them across Europe, far away from their homes. Now, their hometown had lost all its best fighters and had become forcibly invested in Roman military success. Now, the Batavians had to give a damn about how well the Romans were doing in Britain because they gave a damn about their brothers and sons and nephews there. And the Romans convinced them all that this was a privilege. It didn't always work. Tacitus tells a great story about a group of Usipi men whom the Romans corralled into a cohort, trained up, and sent to Britain with a Roman centurion.[†] Immediately upon arriving in England – and who hasn't had this reaction upon arrival in Kent? – the Usipi men declared that they were not staying, killed their centurion, stole three boats and legged it. Boated it. Sailed it. Whatever. Attempting to sail north, but unable to sail, they flailed around eating one another until some Frisians picked them up and immediately enslaved them because what else is there to do with some lads you found in the sea? Taken back to Frisia (the Netherlands coastal region), the Frisians sold several of them to the Romans, whereupon they gained some notoriety for their story. Not their freedom though.[4] Romans told this story as a wild affair, because it is. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the auxiliary strategy worked brilliantly.

Part of the reason it worked so well was that when the Romans stripped an area of men to fill their army, their wives and children followed. Not just as camp

followers or hangers-on, but as very official parts of Roman military life, living domestic lives right at the centre of the fort. The most famous of the Vindolanda letters hammers this point home. It was found among a massive cache of letters and documents addressed to Cerialis and Lepidina and it reads as follows:

> Claudia Severa sends greetings to her Lepidina. On the third day before the Ides of September, sister, I warmly invite you for the day of the celebration of my birthday, to make sure that you come to us, in order to make the day more pleasurable for me by your arrival, if you come. Send my greetings to your Cerialis. My Aelius and my little son send their greetings. I shall hope to see you, sister. Farewell, sister, my most precious soul, thus may you fare well, and hail. To Sulpicia Lepidina, (wife) of Flavius Cerialis, from Severa.[5]

If we had nothing but this letter, we would still know an astonishing amount about life in Roman auxiliary forts on the edge of the empire. First, here we have two women writing to one another. This is the only example from the entire millennium-and-a-half of Roman power in the west that exists of non-aristocratic women writing Latin letters. It's not a formal letter. It's written on a little single-use wooden tablet. It's a postcard. Secondly, we know that Lepidina was not an outlier in Britain as an officer's wife. Somewhere nearby, another woman lived with her husband and children. Thirdly, these people had birthday parties and travelled around the country to attend one another's celebrations.

All this is *wonderful.* Truly wonderful stuff. The image of a Batavian-Roman husband and wife, with their two children, getting in a cart and travelling over to a different fort to have a birthday party for the birthday girl is genuinely glorious. Fourthly, we know that Claudia Severa – the birthday girl – owned an enslaved scribe. The first two sentences of her letter are written in one very neat and professional hand. But the final two sentences, sending personal greetings to Cerialis, appear in a second, much less confident and more childlike hand. Claudia Severa dictated the first lines to her scribe, presumably as one of several invites sent to families in other nearby forts. But then, before she sent it off, she grabbed the pen, dipped it in the ink and scrawled in her unaccustomed hand a personal note sending special greetings and calling Lepidina 'my most precious soul'. And thus she accidentally left us the rarest thing in the world: a Roman woman's handwritten affection.

This letter gave archaeologists a clue they needed to identify other letters involving Claudia Severa and, before long, several letters had been collated which illuminate a deeply warm and affectionate relationship between two families, living far from home and finding pleasure in one another's company, two of which were written by Severa. From these other letters, between Severa and Lepidina and between their husbands, we learn that Severa's husband was Aelius Brocchus and that they lived at a fort in Briga. Unfortunately, no one has any idea where Briga is. It is completely lost. It was somewhere in Britain, and probably not too far away as it appears that the two families corresponded and visited a lot, but otherwise we are in the dark.[†]

The second letter from Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina is a reply to a request from Lepidina that Severa visit Vindolanda. Severa says that she has spoken to her husband and he has said that 'it was always sincerely granted to me, along with … to go to visit you in whatever way I can.'[6] In this letter, Claudia signs off by again taking the pen and personally calling Lepidina 'my most adored soul'.

Other letters between Brocchus and Cerialis show that Cerialis and Lepidina visited Briga for a New Year celebration and then visited again for the festival of Fortuna on 24 June.[7] At some point Lepidina also had a birthday party – I hope Claudia Severa was invited – and on 25 December Brocchus visited Vindolanda for dinner.[8]

The shopping list for the Fortuna celebration at Vindolanda has been found (where it is noted that 'the master' Cerialis stayed at Briga and did not need to be fed) and lists an immense amount of alcohol and food for what looks like a spectacular booze up. The list includes sixty-eight litres of Celtic beer and forty-six litres of really good wine, plus an unknown amount of cheap wine and even more really cheap wine. A litre of wine is about seven glasses (undiluted) so that's 476 glasses of *just* the good stuff. Plus 120 pints of beer. And the rest. Assuming that the Briga order was even bigger, as they had guests, we can hypothesise that when it was time to party, auxiliaries always partied hard. And they ate well all year round too. Many of the Vindolanda tablets record very detailed lists and accounts kept by fort administrators of all the food they bought and served and the food is very decent. Before the Vindolanda discoveries, historians sort of assumed that Roman military food was little more than gruel and misery while meat was rarer than a hen's tooth, but Vindolanda's accounts include a lot of meat. A lot. At one point, an account notes that Cerialis ate ten chickens. Pork, crackling, trotters, apples, eggs, fish sauce, olives, various cereals, salt and pepper and all kinds of other delicious things were bought and fed to the soldiers and to Lepidina and her guests.[9] Other letters between Cerialis and Brocchus talk about them hunting together with nets, catching boar and venison and birds from thrushes to swans.[10] I don't know about you, but the idea of Lepidina and Cerialis sitting down in a Roman fort for a delicious dinner of roast wild swan is genuinely hilarious to me.

All this might be a bit jarring if you've spent your life imagining Roman border forts as spartan, hard places, all bare stone and bare bones. Women having birthday parties doesn't really fit the stereotype of Roman military life. But the archaeology at Vindolanda demonstrates that life in a Roman fort didn't need to be hard or spartan or miserably masculine. Most surprisingly – to me at least – is the discovery that the fort was effectively rebuilt every time a new cohort arrived so that the lodgings were appropriate and comfortable for the number and type of soldiers living there. Soldiers didn't need to cram into all-purpose accommodation because they simply built themselves the right accommodation and tore down what they didn't need. When the 480 men of the *cohors VIIII Batavorum* arrived, the fort almost doubled in size.[11] The fort that Sulpicia Lepidina lived in took up seven acres of land and housed a great many more people than just the soldiers. The infantry lodged in groups of eight in the barracks, while the cavalry slept closer to their horses next to the stables. Centurions had their own rooms attached to the barracks, but the officers lived in a separate house which they could decorate themselves.

Because the Roman army apparently loved lists even more than it loved stomping on natives, there are of course lists of the stuff that Lepidina and Cerialis brought with them to decorate their home. They had things like egg cups and bronze lamps, vases and vinegar bowls, white blankets, serving platters and incredibly expensively dyed curtains in green and scarlet and even purple.[12] Purple dye in the ancient world was produced from the gooey secretions of a specific type of sea snail living only in the East Mediterranean and North Africa. Extracting this goo, turning it into dye and then shipping it across the sea was eye-wateringly time-consuming and expensive because it involved effectively milking a snail. Did you know until this moment that one could milk a sea snail? I did not and I regret

knowing it now. Purple fabrics were a real status symbol in the Roman Empire, evidence of having a good amount of money. And Lepidina had a purple curtain adorning her home in northern England, making her house within a fort not only a cosy, soft, curtainy space, but a luxurious one too.

Among the many other buildings in the fort were warehouses, manufacturing and building workshops, a headquarters filled with offices, a bath house, stables, granaries and kitchens. Each of these was filled with people, both enslaved and free. It is very clear from the archaeology that many, many of these people were women and children. It is commonly stated – because it's true – that the Romans banned soldiers from marrying for over two hundred years. Regardless, there were, in fact, loads of women living in Roman forts, in the barracks with their long-term partners, having and raising children.[13] Some married before they signed up to be an auxiliary and brought their wives with them, others may not have been legally married – although evidence suggests that some soldiers did call their partners wives – but soldiers were not celibate. They undoubtedly formed stable relationships with women with whom they lived and worked. One of the most common finds at Vindolanda, for example, is shoes. Piles and piles of shoes have emerged from the barracks and the officers' house and many of these shoes are definitely shoes for women and children.[14] Lepidina's shoes can be easily identified because she had very narrow, straight feet and the leather she wore moulded to her shape. One pair she left behind were particularly beautiful and intricate summer sandals, so expensive and lovely that they were stamped with the name of the leatherworker who made them: Lucius Aebutius Thales.[15]

Sulpicia Lepidina lived a life in Vindolanda surrounded by other women and children, the partners and kids of her husband's colleagues and underlings. When a Roman auxiliary soldier finished his term, he was given a kind of graduation diploma rewarding him with citizenship and many of these mention wives and children. The surviving names suggest that many of the soldiers' wives and partners came from the same places as their husbands.[16] In other words, these weren't local women that soldiers picked up or sex workers who never went home, these were women who travelled across land and sea to stay with their enlisted husbands, who lived with their husbands in their barracks and who made Roman forts domestic, social spaces as well as military spaces. Women, like Lepidina, made Vindolanda more than a workspace, they made it a home. The letters that Lepidina received and filed away in her husband's archives demonstrate that socialising and partying and religious observance and love and children's play were built into the fabric of Roman military life for men and women.

On 1 March, the cohort also celebrated the Matronalia, an explicitly family festival.[17] Some modern(ish) historians call it a 'women's festival' because it celebrated Juno Lucina, goddess of marriage and childbirth, and because married women performed the necessary sacrifices. Such a reading suggests that marriage and children are somehow things that only women participate in, when I'm pretty sure that men also have a part to play in marriages and babies. Takes two to tango and all that. If we learned anything from the story of the Sabine women, it should be that marriage was incredibly important to Roman men and even more so after Augustus was finished. More recent readings of the Matronalia emphasise that the festival celebrated the domestic *familia*, which included enslaved members of the household. As well as the wives' sacrifice to Juno Lucina, traditions of the Matronalia included the matriarch serving the enslaved people in the home a celebratory meal, and the husband and wife giving each other gifts. This leads to the very real possibility that women throughout the Roman world spent 2 March

each year complaining, ‘I went all out for Matronalia and got him a really lovely new hunting net and all I got was a walnut, AITA for being sad about this?’ The point is that the festival gave Roman families a space to honour and appreciate one another and their home and their domesticity.[18] That this festival was celebrated by the *cohors VIIII Batavorum* inside a Roman fort on the edge of the empire says a lot about both the fluid nature of ‘Romanness’ and how people lived within Roman military enclosures.

It also raises the issue of children. Lepidina’s life may have been spent caring for her children, as Claudia Severa’s certainly was, although I’m not one hundred per cent sure that Lepidina had children. Severa mentions her son in her letters, and she sends her love from her whole family to Lepidina and Cerialis. However, she does not send greetings to any of their children. If we had the letters alone, we might think that Lepidina simply had no kids and was living a carefree, child-free life. The archaeology, however, says something different. It says there were children in Lepidina’s house. Kids who had expensive shoes. Maybe up to three of them, one of whom had a limp.[19] And that’s not all; archaeologists also found tablets that appear to be children’s writing exercises. One contains an extract of the *Aeneid* written in one hand while a second person – presumably a tutor – marked it and called it lazy![20] Apparently, Lepidina lived with at least a couple of kids who she put in good clothes and paid to have educated in reading and writing and literature. And apparently her friend Claudia Severa had little to no interest in them. Potentially these kids were enslaved or Lepidina and Cerialis had fostered them in some way, or maybe they were her bio kids and Severa was just rude, but either way children were a feature of both their lives and both women had to worry about buying them new shoes as they grew and checking their Latin homework in between supervising the dusting of their scarlet and purple curtains and making the arrangements for their birthday dinners. And, of course, writing to their friends.

Throughout most of ancient history, the historical record is monstrously silent on female friendship. When men wrote about female relationships, they mostly considered them to be either trivial or malignant. Women were either gossips or rivals, inherently adversaries either to one another or some other woman.[21] The letters between Claudia Severa and Sulpicia Lepidina are a tiny shining light in the abyss of Roman history showing how lovely and how effusive female friendship could be in the Roman world. We’ve already noted that Severa took the time and effort to add personalised, handwritten notes to the letters she sent Lepidina. She took the tablet and the pen from the bored enslaved person she dictated to and carefully, crudely, wrote out her feelings. Her lavish, exuberant feelings. Reading Severa’s letters to Lepidina feels like frolicking in a babbling brook of affection. From Severa calling her ‘my Lepidina’ to mentioning that her birthday would be so much more pleasurable if she could spend it with her friend, to her excitement at visiting Vindolanda and her wildly affectionate handwritten epithets ‘*soror … karissima et anima ma desideratissima*’, ‘*soror anima mea ita … karissima*’: my sister, my most cherished soul, my most beloved and most desired soul. She repeatedly hopes that Lepidina is well, sends greetings over and over in the same letter. The effect is a pile-up of warm emotions. If only we had one response from Lepidina so we could see how she responded! Was she as besotted with Severa? Did they hug and giggle and grip one another’s hands when they saw one another? Or was she wildly creeped out by this absolute level 10 clinger? You can pick your own adventure. The fact that they apparently go back and forth visiting one another by themselves, without their busy husbands in tow, and the fact that Lepidina kept these letters, storing them away alongside her husband’s letters, suggests to me that

they really were pals, but that's merely a suggestion.

Perhaps the most important part is knowing that Claudia Severa felt this way about her friend and wrote these things and put them in her own hand. That sliver of life and emotion and action has miraculously been preserved by the anaerobic conditions of the fort's poo hole and now we can see her handwriting in the British Museum and feel the force of her affection. And then we can speculate about them. I have a feeling that at least one reader will be looking at Severa calling Lepidina 'my most beloved and most desired soul' and absolutely screaming at me for Gal Pal-ing these women. Maybe I am, but there are clear-cut cases of sapphic love in the Roman world, and I don't think that Claudia Severa's letters are among them. Severa both wrote and dictated with passionate emotion towards Lepidina and put extra effort into reinforcing her feelings in her own scrappy handwriting, telling us that she felt a lot for Lepidina.† Whether either of them characterised that emotion as romantic or sexual, however, is impossible to know because we don't have any other examples of women writing to other women to compare it to. This is a prime example of the archaeological record givingeth with one hand and taking-eth away with the other.

As an extra bonus aside, I want to note that Brocchus and Cerialis – the husbands – also shared quite a sweet friendship. They didn't write letters calling each other darling, but they did buy each other presents. In Cerialis's documents, he notes that Brocchus gave him some tunics. Their most adorable interaction, however, is when Brocchus and another soldier, Niger, wrote Cerialis a good-luck letter. Cerialis apparently had a meeting with the governor of Britain, a real-life Senator from actual Rome and the highest military and political power in the whole country. His pals Niger and Brocchus, perhaps thinking he needed a bit of a boost, wrote to him wishing him luck, sending good thoughts and telling him they prayed for him.[22] Cute!

The Vindolanda letters illuminate military life in the Roman Empire and show fort life including women, children, marriage, education, friendship and feasting as well as bureaucracy, deserters and an occasional battle. Life as a Roman auxiliary soldier (during peace time at least) didn't consist entirely of spartan, Stoic deprivation; it also meant soft, rich furnishings, helping kids with their writing and doing up their shoes, and negotiating a domestic set up in a collective space. Women were clearly a part of the fabric of military living, not an outlier but woven tightly into it to the extent that festivals celebrating the domestic *familia* were a part of the social and religious calendar of the cohort. Miraculously, the letters also show us how women could relate to each other with affection and joy, enjoy one another's company and share love between families. Sulpicia Lepidina, by saving these notes, left us a sole example of how warm and caring and passionate Roman life *could* be.

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† The Usipi appear to have been semi-nomadic, popping up all over modern Germany and the Netherlands throughout the Roman period.

† The only potential suggestion I have found is that it might have been in Kirkbride in Scotland, about forty miles from Vindolanda, but that appears to be a straight guess based on the fact there is a fort there. Mattingly, 2007.

† Claudia's personal sign-offs are not a unique feature of Roman-era letter writing. Huge collections of letters survive from the much more hospitable environment of the Egyptian desert and the handwritten sign-off on a dictated letter is very common in personal correspondence between friends and family.

Julia Balbilla

130 CE

The Poet

For the entirety of this book so far, spanning 800-odd years of Roman history, we have been located entirely in western Europe. This chapter, the story of Julia Balbilla, takes us for the first time to the east of the Mediterranean, where we will now be spending a lot more time as the focus of the empire shifts eastward. The star of this chapter is Julia Balbilla, who straddles both east and west, archaeology and literature, and who carries us into the next phase of Roman history.

Julia Balbilla lived during the period sometimes called the High Empire and sometimes called the reign of the Five Good Emperors (despite there being six emperors. Don't ask).† This is the period between 96 CE, when Nerva assassinated Domitian, to 180 CE, when Marcus Aurelius died. During this century, the emperors temporarily abandoned the ideal of biological hereditary monarchy because it had allowed little idiots like Nero and Domitian to rule, and instead they took to choosing a proven successor from among their associates and friends. The result was that several emperors in a row were competent men best suited to the multifaceted and complex job of imperial rule, leading to an unprecedented century of peace within the empire and a massive expansion of Roman power into Africa and Asia. Edward Gibbon, a man who had a shudder-inducing vision of the glory and civilising purpose of Rome, considered this century to be 'the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous',[1] largely because he considered imperial expansion to be an unqualified good, and that assessment has stuck.

From the day that Nerva became emperor until the day that Marcus Aurelius ruined everything by letting his horrible son take over is viewed with rose-tinted glasses as a peak of (and I cannot emphasise these scare quotes enough) 'western civilisation'. This perspective tends to (deliberately) overlook the fact that the period in fact marked a new relationship between Europe and West Asia and brought Arabic and West Asian people into the highest (and lowest) areas of Roman life.

The majority of the military expansion took place during the reign of Trajan, the first non-Italian emperor. Born in Spain, Trajan was an emperor driven by an apparently insatiable desire to personally conquer as much land as he could during one adult life, primarily in central Europe, the Arab Peninsula and Mesopotamia. He rolled through the lands east of the Med, slurping up client kingdoms and enemy territory and making them all Roman like a giant militarised Kirby, inhaling cultures and gaining their power one after another. Trajan's love of conquering meant the destruction of dozens of kingdoms and local power structures in cities spreading from Transylvania to Baghdad and the transplantation of a huge number of people from West Asia (who would now be defined as Arabs) into Rome where they settled, had families and integrated into the Senate. And so began a whole new chapter of Roman history and a distinct turn away from western Europe as the focus of interest. One of those client kingdoms was Commagene, a Greco-Iranian-

Seleucid kingdom in what is now Turkey, ruled at the time by Antiochus IV. Antiochus IV initially resisted Trajan's efforts to take his kingdom but eventually conceded defeat and was allowed to live in Rome with his two sons, continue to be called a king and raise his kids in his own traditions and culture. Thus he, along with his kingdom, was absorbed into the empire and so were his descendants who inherited a complex identity that was equally Roman and not Roman. One of those descendants came to be an imperial poet in the court of Trajan's heir Hadrian.

That poet is Julia Balbilla, whose existence is known entirely from four poems she wrote and left inscribed on the leg of a statue in Egypt. Julia Balbilla's four poems can be seen on the left leg of a colossal statue of the Pharaoh Amenhotep III, who ruled Egypt during the Eighteenth Pharaonic Dynasty, somewhere in the region of 1400–1350 BCE. As a fun and entirely irrelevant Rex Fact, Amenhotep III was Tutankhamen's grandfather.[2] The statue in question originally stood at the entrance of Amenhotep's enormous tomb complex in Thebes, one of a pair of immense guardians reaching sixty feet into the air and dominating the landscape. But, by the time Julia Balbilla turned up on 19 November 130 CE, they were all that remained of the complex and they had taken on an entirely new life as the Colossi of Memnon. A millennium and a half had passed between their erection and Balbilla's arrival and during that time the Romans had forgotten Amenhotep the Magnificent, king of kings, divine son of Amun, the Dazzling Sun Disk and Ruler of Thebes. They had decided instead that the statues represented Memnon, a minor character in the *Odyssey* and star of a lot of Roman-era Homer fanfiction. Memnon was considered to be a king of Ethiopia and the demi-god son of Eos, goddess of the Dawn. He was killed at Troy by Achilles, according to the lost Homeric epic the *Aethiopis*, and then granted immortality by Zeus because Eos simply would not stop crying.[3] Amenhotep III became linked with Memnon for the Romans partly because they didn't try very hard to learn about non-Roman cultures and partly because, for a short period of time, overlapping almost precisely with the Pax Romana, the statues on the bank of the Nile sang in the mornings.

It all began in 27 BCE, in the exact year that Octavian became Augustus, *princeps* of Rome, and initiated the imperial period, when an earthquake hit Egypt and cracked the statues of Amenhotep III. The northern statue sheared in half, its upper section crashing to the ground and the lower section splitting open. Shortly afterwards, as people started to pick up the shattered ruins of their lives and to trust the ground they walked upon again, they couldn't help but notice that some mornings, in the first hour after sunrise, just as the dawn light touched the ravaged statue, it emitted a loud and unignorable noise. The statue sang. This information rapidly spread through the Roman Empire and within a couple of years Romans were showing up all the time to hear the god sing. They developed a story that the gods had granted Memnon this voice so that he could reply to his mother – goddess of the Dawn – when she caressed him every morning. Cute. And they turned up in droves to hear this song. Those who heard it variously described Memnon's voice as being like a lyre string breaking, like a blow, like a crashing of brass and like whistling. I watched some videos of lyre (and harp) strings breaking and brass crashing for the full research experience and I can tell you that they are all unpleasant noises; loud, sudden, discordant and sharp. The kind of noises that come unexpectedly and make you jump a foot in the air. The kind of noise that, were you waiting in the dawn light, in the early morning silence, staring at a broken colossus looming over a desert, probably would make you feel like you'd been smacked by a god when it burst from nowhere. The kind of noise that leaves a real impression.

It is theorised that the sound was a result of dew evaporating and expanding within the limestone as the sun warmed it and escaping very suddenly through cracks with a bang, but unfortunately we cannot investigate the matter. The singing abruptly stopped in 196 CE, possibly as a result of renovations by the emperor Septimius Severus and possibly as a warning from the gods that the third-century crisis was about to begin (that's my personal theory and I will not be talked out of it), and was never heard again. The age of tourism was coming to an end, but during the two centuries it thrived, a lot of Romans did what Romans did best and defaced the incredibly ancient statue.

There are 107 separate bits of Roman-era graffiti on the statue of Amenhotep III, each one of them professionally carved so that Roman officials and aristocrats could say Quintus Woz 'Ere and leave their mark in Luxor. Apparently, it is deeply human to want to leave some evidence of your existence behind when you have an important experience. I know most people get all up in arms about such graffiti and 'damage' but I love it personally. I love historical artefacts as palimpsests, as documents of the culture which created them and of all those who experienced them in the centuries that followed. My favourite part of Dover Castle is not the eleventh-century castle but the graffiti left behind on doors and in corridors by French prisoners of the Napoleonic War recording their own existence. The statue of Amenhotep III exists both as evidence of his magnificent reign, and of Roman cultural imperialism and tourism. That is wonderful to me. Of the people who paid to leave a monument to themselves and their travelling companions in the seemingly immortal stone, eleven were women, of whom six wrote poems.[4] The most prolific of these was Julia Balbilla who, in 130 CE, was travelling with the emperor Hadrian and his wife Sabina as part of their (brace yourself) five-thousand-person entourage.[5]

Like every Roman visitor to Luxor, Sabina and Balbilla travelled to see the famous Singing Statue of Memnon and hoped that the god would sing for them. They woke early three times (various chronologies have been suggested) and walked to the foot of the statue to wait and hope that they would be granted an audience with the god. On the first day, they heard nothing. They stood in the growing heat of the Luxor morning and the broken-down god refused to speak to them, forcing them to get up early a second time and slog out to the statue to try again. On the second day, the conditions were right and they were terrified out of their skins by the singing. To commemorate the occasion, the empress Sabina wrote a poem, a simple little memorial of her existence in that single moment of time which is fairly representative of the vast majority of inscriptions on the statue. Just because it is one of the tiniest handfuls of writing by a Roman empress and that's cool, here it is: 'Sabina Augusta, wife of the emperor Caesar Hadrian, heard Memnon twice within the hour.'[6] Pretty fucking thrilling stuff there, Sabina. Thanks for coming. Thank god, then, for Balbilla who, on that day, wrote two fabulous, teasing, intimate and low-key narcissistic poems, which she took pains to individually sign. The first went like this:

Yesterday, Memnon received the wife in silence
So that beautiful Sabina might return here.
For the lovely form of my queen pleases you.
When she arrives, send forth a divine shout
So that the Lord of All won't be angry with you. No you've
Fearlessly detained for too long his majestic wife.
And Memnon, trembling at the power of the great Hadrian,

Suddenly spoke, and she rejoiced to hear it.[7]

Clearly, there is a great deal of personality here already. Here is a woman ready to tease an immortal god, to accuse him of flirting with her friend by playing hard to get so he can spend more time with her, and then threatening him with the wrath of a puny mortal emperor. Balbilla comes across as an absolute charmer to me, all little nudges and flattery that I would absolutely fall for. Her repeated insistence that the empress Sabina is a babe is adorable to me, and I can't help but hear those lines in the tone of Molly and Amy in *Booksmart* demanding of each other 'who allowed you to be this beautiful? Who allowed you to take my breath away?' I especially like to think this way because Hadrian and Sabina had a notoriously challenging marriage, undermined significantly by the fact that Hadrian very publicly took young male lovers.

Most famously, Hadrian fell in love with a young man called Antinous who had died tragically, possibly by drowning in the Nile, mere weeks before this visit to Luxor.[8] In the aftermath of Antinous's death, Hadrian grieved so hard and with such power, he deified the kid, named a city after him and spent the next few years erecting temples and statues all over the empire to his beauty. In fairness, the kid was hot as hell, all glorious curls and adorable pouts. The boy would kill on Instagram. But for Sabina, it can't have been fun to be travelling around with her husband who hated her (and whom she hated) while he mourned his teenage boyfriend. A real blow to the ego. So I like to imagine Balbilla's poem as an attempt to lift her friend's spirits and bolster her self-esteem a little. Yes, your husband is currently sobbing into a pillow about the boy he's spent the past five years humiliating you with, and sure the god didn't sing *today*, but that doesn't mean you're not hot, Sabina! This is a friendship that is intimate and playful in a manner I find delightful.

Anyway, on the second day, as both Balbilla and Sabina attest, Memnon spoke. In the space of a Roman hour (which is about forty-eight minutes in November in Egypt),[†] the statue boomed at them twice, prompting Sabina's poem and Balbilla to write a very simple 'I Heard Memnon' verse, in which she very pleasingly called Sabina pretty again and noted the exact day of her visit using three different calendars. That poem is useful for dating all kinds of things but Balbilla also left two more. Both are long displays of superiority in various fields: of her learning, her knowledge, her ability with verse, her spirituality and her line-age. The first of these recounts, in magnificent detail, Hadrian's visit to the statue, where he was greeted by three shouts from Memnon (show off). She notes that Hadrian personally commissioned her to write him a poem commemorating the occasion and thus manages to name-drop herself in all four of her poems. The other, however, is more personal and feels like a cry to the universe to remember her. I am not going to quote it in full here because it's not short (I'll put it in the notes for interested readers), but I am going to quote the final lines because I genuinely find them moving:

But I don't think that this statue of you could ever perish,
and I sense in my heart a soul hereafter immortal.
For my parents and my grandparents were pious,
Balbillus the wise and Antiochus the king:
Balbillus was the father of my mother the queen,
and King Antiochus was my father's father.
From their race, I, too, have obtained noble blood,

and these are my writings, Balbilla the pious.[9]

What I find moving here is Balbilla talking directly to the statue and claiming to sense an immortal soul within it. It's possible to read these lines as highly self-aggrandising because she claims to have a special insight into the divine nature of Memnon because of her own royal lineage. Her use of the word 'pious' here is an unsubtle reference that we will come back to. But I read them as quite lonely and her following statements about her descent to be tinged with sadness. In all of her poems, Balbilla insists that readers remember her and know that she is special as a person and as a writer.

I don't know whether Balbilla knew how much the world oppresses, suppresses and erases women's writing and women's art, but I am going to assume that she did because the world is rarely subtle about it and she lived in a brutal patriarchy that I'm sure she couldn't fail to notice. She could see with her own eyes, for example, within her own social circle, that Hadrian was allowed to drag around as many boyfriends as he liked and display them in public for all to see while Sabina was punished for even being friendly with men. One of the men exiled by Hadrian for being 'too informal' with Sabina, FYI, was the biographer we all know and love from his *Twelve Caesars* and the lost *Lives of Famous Whores*, Suetonius Tranquillus.[10] In 1983, Joanna Russ outlined twelve strategies for erasing women's writing and number three is the one that Balbilla tried hardest to fight: 'Denial of Agency: Deny that a woman wrote it.'[11] This fate has been applied to just about every surviving female poet from the Roman period at some point or another and Balbilla's concerted and successful effort to ensure her name was remembered feels like a pointed fight back. But there's another important layer to her decision to list her family tree and that's Balbilla's Commagene identity. Commagene no longer existed as a kingdom in 130 CE. It was now just some cities in the Roman province of Syria. But it still existed in Balbilla.

From Balbilla's scrupulous attention to either self-promotion or desperate self-definition we are able to gaze back through the centuries and see a woman with a complex identity, bringing the newly conquered eastern monarchies right into the very heart of the Roman court. Prosopographers have been able to reconstruct Balbilla's family in some detail. Naturally, few of the other women in her life have been recovered – none of them was smart enough to etch her name deep into ancient stone – but the men of her family are easily identifiable through the names of her grandparents. Her father was Gaius Julius Antiochus Epiphanes, son of Antiochus IV of Commagene and his full sister Iotapa, and her mother was Claudia Capitolina, only daughter of Tiberius Claudius Balbillus. Via her father, therefore, Balbilla laid claim to the ancient royal lineage of Commagene and descent from the legendary Persian emperor Darius I, who ruled an empire which had once stretched from Benghazi in Libya to New Delhi in India. As a daughter of Commagene, Balbilla was a member of a family who had been, and indeed still were, the focus of a royal cult. She shared this with Hadrian, whose adopted father Trajan had been deified after his death, but Balbilla's divine roots trailed much further into history than Hadrian's. She emphasises this with her choice of self-epithet. At the end of the poem she signs off 'Balbilla, the Pious', which sounds reasonable and unexciting in the context of a poem about a god but it isn't. The word she uses (*eusebes*) is a term her father and her paternal grandparents used as a royal epithet, as Amenhotep III used Dazzling Sun Disk in his name, or Louis XIV used the Sun King. It's a form of royal branding for the dynasty. So Balbilla choosing to use that epithet for herself means something. It means that, although her name was fully

Roman and she hung out with the Romans all the time, she saw herself still as part of the royal family of Commagene. She presented herself not as a Roman courtier, but as a Greco-Persian queen.

I find it significant that Balbilla chose to make this side of herself so clear, that she really went out of her way to make explicit her direct relationship to a dead king and a dead kingdom, because if she hadn't made the effort, we would not know from her other writings that she was anything other than a European Roman. Her name comes from her mother's side, from Tiberius Claudius Balbillus, because apparently her mum's Roman roots overrode her eastern royal roots when it came to naming baby girls. Her brother got a much more mixed name, being called Gaius Julius Antiochus Epiphanes Philopappus. From that, etched onto a magnificent tomb that you can still see in Athens, we can tell that he had a mixed heritage. But Julia Balbilla tells us nothing. From her name we could trace only her maternal relatives, primarily her grandfather who was a great Egyptophile. As the prefect of Egypt, he had acted as the head of the Museum in Alexandria and cleared the sand from the Sphinx in Giza for the first time in maybe two millennia.[12] The elder Seneca described him as 'exceptionally talented in every kind of literature'.[13] His father – Balbilla's great-grandfather – had been the emperor Tiberius's personal astrologer and had himself been born in Hellenistic Egypt. All this could have been guessed, but the Greek, Persian, Armenian, Syrian, royal and divine elements of her would be entirely erased. The fact that Balbilla spent the time and money (because carving poems into the leg of Memnon *definitely* cost lots of money) to emphasise her descent from Commagene and her personal majesty says something about how badly she wanted to be remembered as something other than simply Roman and how dedicated she was to keeping the memory of Commagene alive with herself as a living representation of it.

She did a very similar thing for her brother, Philopappus, when he died in Athens. Philopappus, incidentally, is a completely unique name in the Roman Empire and means 'lover of grandad'. Grandad here is presumably Antiochus rather than Balbillus because when Philopappus died, in Athens in 116 CE, his family got permission to build him a tomb on the Hill of the Muses (Mouseion Hill) right by the Acropolis. You can still visit it today. The geographer Pausanias writing maybe fifty years later described the monument as 'the tomb of a Syrian man' because, over its two storeys (two storeys!) it includes a statue of Grandpa Antiochus IV, a statue of their ancient ancestor and Alexander the Great's general Seleucus I and the inscription 'King (*basilius*) Antiochus Philopappus, son of King Antiochus Epiphanes'.[14] Whoever designed this monument wanted to make a strong and unambiguous point that Philopappus saw himself as a king, a living royal descended from divine and ancient ancestors. On the next level of the monument, however, Philopappus's family showed off the other side of his identity and life. A Latin inscription read 'Caius Julius Antiochus Philopappus, son of Caius, of the Fabian tribe, consul, and Arval brother, admitted to the Praetorian rank by the emperor Caesar Nerva Trajan Optimus Augustus Germanicus Dacicus.'[15] That's the emperor Trajan. This sat alongside a frieze showing Philopappus acting as Roman consul, in a toga, surrounded by lictors. In 109 CE, he had been one of the first men of West Asian descent to serve as consul in Rome. At the very top of the monument sat a final statue of Philopappus, dressed not as a king or a consul, but as a Greek god in Athens. This part commemorates the fact that he spent most of his life in Athens. All in all, when Balbilla built her brother's tomb, she was not shy about his mixed heritage and his combined prides. He held within him Romanness and royalty, Europe and Asia, Latin and Greek in equal

measure, and so did Balbilla.

And they were both embraced by the rulers of Rome. Philopappus became a member of the Praetorian Guard (the emperor's personal army) and of the Senate, patronised by Trajan, a friend of Hadrian's, a lifelong public servant in Athens and a literary pal of Plutarch, who dedicated his essay 'How to tell a flatterer from a friend' to 'my dear Antiochus Philopappus'[16] and praised him as a patron of the arts. His sister lived a female version of this life; barred from public life and public service, Balbilla spent her time with the imperial court engaging in arts and patronage and friendship, where she was commissioned by Hadrian to write poems like this:

> I've heard tell that Memnon the Egyptian, warmed by the sun's rays,
> utters a loud sound from the Theban stone.
> Seeing Hadrian, the greatest of kings, and before greeting
> the sun's rays, he [Memnon] addressed him as well as he could.
> But when Titan, driving through the heavens on his white horses,
> held the second division of the day in the shadows,
> Memnon again sent forth a cry, [a sound] like beaten bronze,
> high-pitched; he even sent out a third cry in greeting.
> Then the emperor Hadrian himself greeted Memnon appropriately,
> and left behind on the stone for posterity
> written verses documenting all he had seen and heard.
> It was clear to all that the gods love him.[17]

Balbilla's four poems are rich with knowledge of Egyptian and Persian history, of religion, myth and legend. But most importantly, they are written in perfect, flawless Aeolic Greek. A dead dialect and the source of the big question that circles Balbilla: was she gay? In the primary biography of Hadrian, Anthony Birley explicitly claimed that Balbilla was in 'a lesbian relationship' with the empress Sabina, as 'her answer to Hadrian's Antinous'.[18] This reading of Balbilla has worked its way into everything from blog posts to gay history books.[19] This theory derives from a 1990s analysis by Ewen Bowie and is based on two facts: first, that Balbilla calls Sabina beautiful or lovely three times; and second, that Balbilla's verses are written in the dialect that Sappho used in 600 BCE.[20] That dialect, Aeolic, was dead by the time Balbilla was writing, and existed exclusively as the language of Sappho's poems. Balbilla's decision to write in Aeolic is a statement akin to me deciding to write this book in Chaucer's Middle English: an impressive but unnecessary feat which makes a specific point. The question is what point Balbilla was making with her language choice and her decision to place herself in the tradition of Sappho specifically. Was she identifying with Sappho as a woman? Was it purely an aesthetic choice? Or was she identifying herself with Sappho's poems about being a woman who loved women? Was she using Aeolic to slyly declare her sexual relationship with the empress on the leg of a famous statue?

In the modern world, Sappho is synonymous with female homosexuality. In the nineteenth century, Sappho from Lesbos gave her name to the primary terms for women who exclusively love women: sapphic and lesbian. From the perspective of the late twentieth- and twenty-first century, Sappho's primary attribute is not her poetry but her sexual attraction to women and her hot poems about girls, like 'But she goes back and forth remembering/gentle Atthis and in longing/she bites her tender mind.'[21] It is, therefore, really hard to imagine someone putting a load of

effort into aligning themselves with Sappho in a context that is not sexual.

Analyses of Balbilla from the earlier twentieth century, on the other hand, when men still refused to talk about lesbians in public but would just about acknowledge that women were a thing, did not see this. For a long time, researchers assumed that Balbilla chose to use Sappho's Aeolic to align herself with a specifically female poetic tradition. They understood Sappho simply as a female poet. The ancients considered Homer to be the greatest poet of all time and called him simply The Poet, just as we refer to Shakespeare as The Bard. Sappho was called both The Tenth Muse and The Poetess and considered to be Homer's only equal in the literary sphere. Some critics of Balbilla's work therefore came to believe that her choice to write in Aeolic was an explicitly gendered act: men write in Homeric language, women write in Sapphic. Men want to be Homer; women want to be Sappho and never the twain shall meet. The gender line has been laid down.

Coming straight down the middle is the expert on Julia Balbilla, Patricia Rosenmeyer, who argues that both these readings perceive Balbilla as a woman first and a poet second, when it is perfectly reasonable to believe that Balbilla considered herself a woman and a poet equally, or even privileged her identity as a poet above her gender.[22] I certainly know several novelists and poets who would be appalled to be described as a 'woman novelist' or a 'female writer'. They consider themselves to be artists who happen to be women rather than women who write. To have their aesthetic choices read through the lens of their gender presentation exclusively would (and does) drive them bananas as it undermines their engagement with their art form and reduces everything they do to 'because female'. It feels obvious to say, but no one does this to men who write poems.

My personal reading of Balbilla's poems is that there is no reason why she can't have been doing all of these things and showing off her ability all at once. The language choice stands out to me as a lot of effort and work, a real display of ability and knowledge on the spot for her wider circle. Balbilla's Aeolic poems include all kinds of nightmare features like a completely obsolete letter (the digamma ϝ. The guy employed to carve the poems must have cursed her for that one) and manipulation of the dialect to fit Homer's Ionic Greek words. On top of that, a lot of her poems are taken up with her demonstrating how much she knows about myth and legend. She knows the Egyptians call Memnon Amenhotep or Amenoth; she knows the story that the statue had been deliberately broken by the legendary Persian king Cambyses in 525 BCE. She spins all of this knowledge into poems that are flawless in language and metre. Balbilla has brains and ability and skill and she puts them on full display here. But there's no getting around the fact that quite a few of the Aeolic poems that survive from antiquity are written by women, including one other on the statue of Memnon (by a woman called Damo), or the fact that Balbilla really goes out of her way in a homoerotic kinda way to emphasise how damn pretty Sabina is. If nothing else, describing the empress having a 'lovely form' and being 'my lovely empress' is an unusually intimate public display of affection. And, as Ovid shows, Romans certainly did read Sappho as having sex with girls (unlike the Attic Greeks who universally portrayed her as a cougar preying on young men) and fancying women.[23]

So perhaps, by writing in Aeolic verse, Balbilla was doing more than one thing: demonstrating her expertise and skill, highlighting her own femininity and subtly disclosing an intimate relationship between herself and Sabina in a way that only the highly educated would get.

Few people have ever been kind to Balbilla's poems. She has been called 'superficial', 'atrocious', 'unlikely to excite anyone because of literary style',

‘turgid and banal’, ‘vain and tedious’ and generally considered to be at the very bottom of the literary hierarchy.[24] All a lot of very mean things to say about some poems made up on the fly in a desert after a statue shouted at the author, written in a language she did not speak. None of that particularly matters to me. Most poetry is mediocre. Hell, most art is mediocre. That’s the point. If everyone were Sappho or Shakespeare, then no one is truly great. The average talents keep the world moving on. To me, the important part is not the poems’ literary significance but the effort that Balbilla exerted to make sure that everyone who visited the statue for the rest of time – this immortal statue, she says – knows exactly who Julia Balbilla was. Not only did she put her name in every poem she wrote, but she also made sure to cite her entire family tree so she could never be mistaken for anyone else, so that she could carve her own identity and her own self-image into history. Unlike almost every other person in the book, we see Julia Balbilla exactly as she wanted us to see her. We see a woman who created a public image of herself. There is no domestic side to this image – you might have noticed that no husband or children are mentioned. We have no idea whether she had a marriage and babies and simply didn’t mention them or remained unmarried or was widowed, because she did not want us to know. Balbilla wanted to speak to other educated readers – only people who could read Aeolic verse could read her words – and she wanted to leave an impression of herself as knowledgeable and skilled, Roman and royal, eastern and western, a beloved and loving close confidante of the imperial family, and a special seer into the hearts of gods. In that context, the charm of her verse seems like the least important thing in the world.

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† OK, you asked. They are: 1. Nerva (96–98 CE), 2. Trajan (98–117 CE), 3. Hadrian (117–138 CE), 4. Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE), 5. Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE) and 6. Marcus Aurelius’s largely forgotten adoptive brother and co-ruler Lucius Verus (161–169 CE). Justice for Imperator Caesar Lucius Aurelius Verus Augustus starts here.

† Roman time counting was not static, as ours is. Each day consisted of twelve ‘hours’, beginning when the sun rose and ending when the sun set. In midsummer, when there were fifteen objective hours of daylight, a Roman ‘hour’ could be up to ninety minutes long, while in midwinter, when there were only nine actual hours of daylight, an ‘hour’ could come in at forty-five minutes. Isn’t history fun!

Perpetua

203 CE

The Christian Martyr

It is finally time to deal with a phenomenon which would eventually engulf the Roman Empire but which seemed, at first, to be merely a pest. One of the most common questions asked about the rise of Christianity is how did this happen? How did a tiny rebellious sect keep growing, outwitting the entire empire's attempts to stamp on it by killing as many Christians as possible? Part of the answer to that question, I think, lies in the first-person accounts written by early Christian extremists, mostly martyrs. In these texts they laid out their feelings about Christianity in rich, emotive detail. While theologians wrote out their thoughts and theories and philosophies, martyrs recorded their emotional attraction to monotheism with extraordinary power. My favourite of all these is the martyr St Vibia Perpetua.

The first time Christians appear in the written sources of the ancient world, a Roman Senator is fretting about executing them. They turn up, anonymously, in the letters of Pliny the Younger, who you may remember from such events as nearly dying in the eruption of Vesuvius. While special emergency governor of Bithynia in 112 CE, Pliny had a bunch of Christians denounced to him. Genuinely baffled about what to do, Pliny wrote to the emperor Trajan to tell him about the situation and check that his response had been appropriate. He says that he had interrogated anyone denounced to him and attempted to persuade them to say they were not a Christian. Anyone who said the accusation was false, or that they had been a Christian but now saw the error of their foolish un-Roman ways, was asked to do a sacrifice to the emperor, 'curse Christ' and then allowed to go home and live their lives. On the other hand, those who insisted that they were Christians he continued to interrogate repeatedly, threatening them with execution and exhorting them to renounce their 'folly' and be good Romans. If they persisted in their 'stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy' Pliny had them executed for their 'depraved, excessive superstition'.[1] Trajan replied that Pliny had acted with complete correctness but did not respond to Pliny's anxieties about the spread of Christianity through 'every age, rank and gender, through the cities and the towns and the villages and the farms of Bithynia, leaving temples deserted and vital rites uncelebrated'.

In this letter, Pliny laid out the foundation for dealing with Christians when they came into contact with imperial bureaucracy. As I'm sure you know, Christianity emerged very quickly as a religion after the death of Jesus during the reign of Tiberius, mostly because St Paul and others proselytised and evangelised relentlessly from day dot. The same force driving Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses to knock on your door all the time drove the very first Christians to witness and preach and attempt to convert everyone around them too. Because evangelism works, Christianity spread and mutated and spread some more across the empire, but particularly east and south of the Mediterranean in West Asia and Africa. For the most part, Roman authorities ignored it but every so often, because people like to beef with their neighbours, governors and bureaucrats would find

themselves confronted with a Christian who had been denounced as a godless traitor to the empire and would have to work out what to do with them. The reason that Christians posed a problem was that Christians refused to sacrifice to other gods and to the emperor and thus undermined the vital *quid pro quo* communal relationship between the gods and Roman Empire which kept it running smoothly.[2] If you cast your mind back a few pages, you'll remember that the Roman belief system heavily emphasised giving prayers, sacrifices and gifts to the gods in order to win favour. They believed themselves to be so good at giving sacrifices that they had been given their imperial prosperity by the gods as their reward. Everyone had to keep giving so that the good times continued. Since then, they had bolted on some emperor worship, whereby all inhabitants of the empire were expected to sacrifice to and for the safety of the emperor as a test of loyalty and of belonging. The problem with Christians was that they refused to get involved with the collective bargaining with the divine, and they refused to be a part of the community who protected the emperor, and they thus compromised everything the Romans believed their empire stood for. This could not be allowed to stand. It was too risky.

Pliny's approach typified the majority of interactions between confused Roman officials and denounced Christians, as outlined in scores of accounts of Christian trials recorded, copied and disseminated throughout Christian communities. The judge asked the accused whether they were a Christian. If the accused said no, they were asked to sacrifice to the emperor to prove their polytheism and loyalty to the empire. If they refused, or said they were a Christian, then they were repeatedly pressured to recant and sacrifice before they were arrested, imprisoned and eventually executed as a low criminal for their impiety and their rejection of the Roman gods, perceived by all parties to be a wholesale rejection of Romanness. This might have worked at stamping out any other religion, but Christianity managed to take public humiliation and torture and debasement and turn them into a glorious advertising campaign.

For polytheistic Romans, the prospect of torture, disgrace and pain in public with thousands of people laughing at your genitals and baying for your blood was a great disincentive to doing crimes, or at least a great incentive to renounce your dalliance with monotheism. For the very dedicated Christian, however, such a prospect was less a threat than a promise of heaven. Among these very dedicated Christians at the turn of the third century in the city of Carthage, Tunisia, was Vibia Perpetua, a young woman who left a handwritten personal account of her experience being arrested, tried and imprisoned for the crime of monotheism.

Perpetua was twenty-two years old on 7 March 203 CE.[3] Described as 'well born, liberally educated and legally married', she had just given birth to a baby boy, whom she was still breast-feeding, and somehow she had recently discovered Christianity and taken to it with a frightening zeal and enthusiasm.[4] Perpetua had joined a house church, a very small community of Christians led by a guy called Saturus. The community included just five brand new Christians: Perpetua, Saturninus, Revocatus, Secundulus, and one other woman, Felicitas: young, enslaved and eight months pregnant. None of them were yet baptised Christians but were called catechumens, receiving their training from their leader Saturus and their local deacons so that they could be baptised. They had thus violated a new ordinance banning new conversions to Christianity in Carthage and had either been denounced or, possibly, handed themselves over voluntarily to be executed.

As Christianity spread across the empire, it wrought many changes, but my favourite of all Christianity's innovations is its veneration of voices and texts that

the polytheistic Roman culture devalued and derided. In all of Roman history so far, we have seen over and over that women had rich lives, complex emotional landscapes, extraordinary and exciting experiences and that they wrote about them. They wrote letters and poems and graffiti and business records and probably diaries but, because they were female-authored and because they did not consider the glorious pursuits of great men, politics and war they were not copied or sold or preserved outside of their own circles and so they have been irretrievably lost to the big black hole of history. For a brief time, however, when it was small and scrappy and illegal, early Christianity was flexible, open and, frankly, needy enough to take every voice that it could and elevate them when those voices showed devotion to the cause. And Perpetua showed extraordinary devotion to her cause, to the extent that her prison diaries became a hugely popular Christian text throughout the Roman Empire, copied into Greek and read aloud yearly in Carthage to commemorate her martyrdom.

That's kind of a spoiler, unless you read the chapter title I suppose, but there were only two ways to become a famous Christian in the third century CE: you were either a brilliant (male) theologian or you died horribly but bravely. Perpetua, being female, obviously fell into the second category. Christianity might have been a *bit* more open to female voices, but it wasn't willing to listen to women preach. Christians were, however, willing to listen to women bravely suffering and being lifted out of their mortal (female) bodies in the act of dying for Christ, and so when Perpetua left behind an intimate diary of her misery, her trials and the miracles she believed she experienced, they loved it.

Perpetua began writing her diary in prison, following a few days of house arrest and another few days in the very depths of a Roman dungeon, a boiling, dark, stifling, overcrowded, filthy prison where guards were left to run free. Eventually, fellow Christians who had escaped arrest bribed the guards who allowed the five prisoners to be moved to a nicer part of the prison (with a window perhaps) and Perpetua to access writing materials so that she could record her martyrdom for the edification of future Christians.

The first lines of her text concern an argument she had with her father – who is about to become a major character but never gets named, in a fun gender reversal – while under house arrest. Perpetua's dad responded with sheer bafflement to the revelation that his daughter, his favourite child, had converted to Christianity and been arrested for it. Like most non-Christians (and a lot of less extreme Christians) her dad could not wrap his brain around Perpetua's refusal to sacrifice to the emperor Septimius Severus, swear allegiance to the empire and get on with her life. To him, she just needed to do one simple public act and then she and her whole family could live freely; she didn't even have to mean it. Perpetua responded with a simple, but infuriating, Platonic argument. She appears to be very proud of her argument, and it summarises perfectly how Christianity differed from polytheistic religion:

> 'Father,' I said, 'do you see this vase lying here, for example, this small water pitcher or whatever?' 'I see it,' he said. And I said to him: 'Can it be called by another name other than what it is?' And he said: 'No'. 'In the same way, I am unable to call myself other than what I am, a Christian.'[5]

Christianity, to many, was not simply a bolt-on belief but fundamentally altered the believer. It made them into something different from everyone else, separated them from their community, their family and the state. Christianity gave them entirely

new objectives and priorities in life and death. Perpetua saw herself not just as an African-Roman worshipper of Christ, like one might be a worshipper of Dionysus or Mithras, but as a Christian, a non-Roman. Non-Christians struggled to understand this (and still fail to understand the worldview of people who espouse religious fundamentalism) and could not comprehend at all how profoundly Christianity offered an estrangement from normal life to those who wanted it. This utter separation and focus on the individual above the community would go on to cause some very serious problems for the empire.

At this point, however, at the start of the third century with the Pax Romana still firmly in place, all that happened was that Perpetua's father deeply regretted all the money he had spent on getting her a very, very good rhetorical education and screamed in a rage so guttural and wrenching, it genuinely scared his daughter, who worried he was going to attack her. He instead stormed out, leaving Perpetua to think on her actions. Unfortunately for him, she believed that her actions were not only morally correct but actively doing good. She was witnessing and she was thrilled.

Perpetua's father appears four times in her six-paragraph diary. He appears next at her hearing in the Forum in Carthage where the governor of the province of Africa himself, Hilarianus, questioned her. This time, her father carried her son (also unnamed) and begged Perpetua to take pity on him in his old age (with his grey hairs) and on her own child 'who will not be able to live without you', and on her mother and brothers, who did not show up. He threw himself at her feet, he kissed her hands, he completely subjugated himself in begging her, weeping and calling her *domina* – mistress. If my dad did these things to me, I would simply die of horror and guilt on the spot but Perpetua remained completely steadfast in her path to martyrdom. She recorded herself as saying 'what God has willed will be done … know that we are no longer in our own power but in God's.' Predictably, Perpetua's father did not find this comforting because the pair had two totally opposed worldviews. For Perpetua's father, a Roman citizen and a free man, his family was the highest priority in his life, next to the empire. He didn't perceive himself to be an individual man, but a part of a web of relationships, hierarchies, duties, emotions and obligations which made up Roman society. He had obligations to his children, his parents, his associates, his patrons and clients, his rulers and his gods, and they in turn were obligated to respect and care for him. But, although Perpetua cared, she had a worldview now that totally rejected obligation, duty, social inclusion, family and civic participation as valid or desirable things. The two had come to a very painful impasse.

By happy coincidence, we as historians know a little about what Perpetua was thinking as she walked into the Forum at Carthage to face the governor; information that her father did not have and would probably have failed to appreciate. First, we have the writings of Tertullian, my all-time favourite early Christian woman-hater. That's not a joke; I genuinely love his bonkers hard-line, uncompromising theologies of misogyny which perceive the entire concept of women to be literally evil, booming furiously to all women: 'You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree … On account of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.[6] I love imagining what his wife had to say about this kind of thing. Anyway, the author of these words was also from Carthage and he wrote and taught prolifically in about 180–220 CE, overlapping precisely with Perpetua's martyrdom. In 197 CE he published his treatise on martyrs, outlining the prevailing theology of martyrdom in Carthage, meaning that Perpetua would almost certainly be aware of his thoughts about

Christians who were imprisoned and executed. Specifically, Tertullian thought that martyrs were the greatest of God's soldiers and his most beloved and strongest athletes. Martyrdom to early Christians was not pointless death or suicide; it was a glorious sacrifice in the eternal war with the devil. Tertullian promised his readers that 'the sword, the fire, the cross, the wild beasts, the torture; these surely are but trifling sufferings to obtain a celestial glory and a divine reward.'[7] When Perpetua and her companions stepped into the Forum, where a mob had gathered to see real-life Christians in the flesh, they were primed to see their interrogation and condemnation as a chance to demonstrate their immense strength, bravery and divine glory.

The other thing that we, as readers, know about Perpetua in this moment is that the night before her trial she had asked for and received a divine vision of her future. That night someone had told her that she should ask God for a vision to learn whether the Carthaginian Christians would be freed or suffer in the arena. They asked her because they knew that she was able to communicate with God (though she doesn't say how), and she confidently promised her friends that she would report back to them with the results of her chat with the divine creator of the universe. The girl had staggering self-esteem, you have to give her that. So she prayed and as she slept she received a prophetic vision. She saw a bronze ladder reaching up to heaven, narrow and studded on each side with iron weapons so that anyone climbing it had to move carefully and slowly. At the bottom of the ladder lay a huge serpent (*draco*) scaring off anyone who wanted to climb the ladder. It has to be said at this point that Perpetua never received a subtle vision. The imagery of her divine revelations is never anything but bludgeoningly obvious. A cynic might see this as evidence of a young woman making up dreams but those cynics would be mean. Anyway, the serpent prevented people from getting onto the ladder to heaven, but the deacon Saturus, in the vision, had already climbed up and he reached for Perpetua, giving her the courage to confront the serpent and step on its head. Stepping on heads is a real motif in Christian literature. She slowly climbed the ladder to an enormous garden where a white-haired man sat milking sheep and making cheese while surrounded by thousands of individuals dressed in white. The man welcomed Perpetua as 'my child' and placed cheese in her cupped hands, communion-style. Upon eating the cheese, the white-clad figures began to chant 'Amen' and Perpetua woke up and went to trial with the unshakable, divinely given knowledge that she and her companions would face the devil, die violently and enter heaven.[8] Which was a win. That knowledge gave Perpetua and her co-Christians the courage and the power to face the governor, the jeering, curious mob of onlookers and their own families and say *Christiana sum.* I am a Christian. The words that would condemn them to a criminal's death.

Notably, throughout her writing, Perpetua does not present herself as being unmoved by her dad or her family. Later versions of Perpetua's martyrdom, such as the two Late Antique *Acta*, always present Perpetua as hard-hearted and emotionless in the face of her grieving father and crying baby (and husband, who does not appear in her own text). She says things like 'I would only be moved to tears if I found myself outside the presence of God and the community of saints' and 'Depart from me, you that work iniquity, for I never knew you' while throwing her infant son at her parents.[9] She comes across as a right dick when other people are writing about her. In her own memoir, however, Perpetua emphasised her own pain and grief at hurting her father and losing her son. She hated it, but she felt that she had to do it. Being a martyr wasn't supposed to be easy.

In particular, she wrote about being tormented by her throbbing, leaking breasts and about missing her child dreadfully. At one point, she was allowed to have her son briefly in the prison with her because he was starving without his mother's milk and she wrote 'immediately I grew stronger, and I was relieved of the anxiety and worry I had for my baby. Suddenly the prison became my palace.' When her baby was taken away from her again following her trial, she wrote about being 'tormented by worry for my child or by the pain in my breasts'. She prays for relief and receives a physical miracle: her son was instantaneously weaned and her milk dried up, thus easing both her terror that her son would starve to death (unbaptised) and the deep, miserable ache of swollen, milk-filled breasts.[10] This is one of the very, very few first-person perspectives on the physical and emotional experience of motherhood in the Roman Empire, depicted as the deepest love and the deepest pain.

Perpetua also writes about being hurt by her father's grief, and deeply sorry for the pain she is causing him. She makes it clear that sacrificing oneself for one's religious conviction is actually very hard emotionally and physically. This is partly why people like Tertullian, who managed to never get denounced somehow, felt the need to write heartening letters to those who found themselves in prison comparing them to soldiers and gladiators bathed in glory and off to heaven: plenty of Christians could not take that heat and, in the great persecutions, serious schisms were caused by the waves of believing Christians who renounced Christ so they could go back to their children, protect the reputations of their spouses and spare their fathers' tears, only to turn up at church the next week.

Following the trial, Perpetua returned to prison, where she and Felicitas experienced several more miracles, cementing them forever in the pantheon of Christian saints. First, Perpetua, whose miracle was spontaneous and occurred entirely through dreams. In the hierarchy of miracles, with curing illness at the pinnacle, it is not top tier if we are honest. It began with Perpetua writing that the name of her deceased younger brother popped into her head out of nowhere as she was praying in the days after her trial. Relieved of her achy boobs, she apparently needed something new to worry about, and so she started worrying about her brother, Dinocrates, who had died at the age of seven of a nasty-sounding face cancer. She began to pray for him and, that night, received a vision of Dinocrates in the afterlife. In this dream/vision, the little boy stood in a place that sounds rather a lot like the prison Perpetua herself currently inhabited: hot, dirty and over-crowded. Dinocrates appeared still disfigured by the tumour that killed him and suffering from a thirst he could not slake because he could not drink. She watched, helpless, as her brother repeatedly tried to reach a bowl of water that was too high. Clearly, unbaptised, unprayed-for Dinocrates was suffering in hell.

This enormously upset Perpetua, who became fixated on interceding for her brother through prayer. I suppose it's as good a method as any to take your mind off being imminently tortured and executed. A few days later, Perpetua slept and saw another vision of Dinocrates. Now, the kid was healed from his tumour, refreshed and unhurt. She saw him 'in the place I had seen before' but now able to play and frolic and drink water from a golden bowl that he could reach. Perpetua could not rescue Dinocrates from the hot, smelly hell he was in because he was not baptised but it is clear that her prayer and intercession could make his afterlife more comfortable and more pleasant. Her ability to do this was a demonstration of her great sanctity and her closeness to God above all the others. This is her second miracle. As I said, not top shelf but it definitely cheered her up a lot and she wrote about it in massive detail because it reinforced her belief in the power of prayer and

the rightness of her suffering; God was rewarding her for her sacrifice.

As the day of their execution approached, Felicitas also experienced a miracle more akin to Perpetua's first. This is a slight detour because Perpetua doesn't include Felicitas in her own narrative at all. She stays entirely focused on herself as young people tend to. Felicitas's story is instead told by the anonymous male editor of Perpetua's memoir who also wrote up the experience of watching the group of Christians die. Felicitas is described as being enslaved and eight months pregnant when she was condemned to be thrown to the beasts. This state of pregnancy would extend her life because Roman law forbade the execution of pregnant women. Even they had limits. Most people might rejoice in getting a few more weeks to breathe and live but early Christians did not work like that. To Felicitas and her companions, her escaping death with the others would be a much worse punishment. Part of the way that Christianity attracted so many onlookers and converts was by presenting themselves as harmless innocents who could not and did not threaten the Roman state when they were interrogated or punished. We see this at the very start when Pliny the Younger finds himself relaying the arguments of the Christians he interrogated, who repeatedly insisted that all they had done wrong was hang out and sing songs and swear not to steal or lie or commit adultery. This argument bamboozled Pliny, and many a Roman official, who simply could not believe that a new religious society, preaching separation from normal Roman religion, community and basic Romanness, could be harmless.[11] They turned out to be right, in a way.

When Christians were executed as a group, they were able to sell themselves as innocents murdered by a cruel machine, because crowds could see that they were just a bunch of normal-looking kids dying bravely and without complaint. If one Christian were to be executed as part of a wider group of 'common criminals', such as bandits or murderers, their magnificent sacrifice would be lost among the mixed bag of victims. Felicitas's martyrdom would lose all its power if she were just one in a collection of bad guys. So the Christians (presumably including Perpetua) prayed and prayed for a solution. The night before their execution date, Felicitas went into premature labour. The labour was tough and bloody, probably because she was still a girl (she's referred to as *puella*) and the prison guards watched her and took the piss as she screamed. How are you going to cope with the beasts, they asked, if you can't even cope with a bit of pushing a child out of your vagina? With remarkable, and some may say unbelievable, clarity of thought during her labour, Felicitas replied that she was alone right now but in the arena 'there will be another inside me suffering for me because I am going to suffer for him.'[12] Felicitas gave birth to a daughter, whom she handed over to another member of her congregation in adoption, and she had recovered by the end of the day. The miracle freed Felicitas to face the beasts and the crowds with her fellow Christians and take meaning from her own execution.

That night, Perpetua had her final and most interesting vision, a vision which has sparked more tortured commentary than any other. She dreamt that she was taken to the amphitheatre by a deacon where she found that she was not faced with a wild beast but with a huge, very ugly Egyptian wrestler (rude, Perpetua) surrounded by the traditional attendants of athletes. She understood that she needed to fight him and that she had her own entourage of trainers and helpers who stripped her naked and began to oil her down. As they took her clothes off she says, 'I became male.' Specifically she says this in a way that cannot be translated into English. She says '*facta sum masculus*' where *facta* is the feminine form of 'I became' and *masculus* is a diminutive with an air of masc-presenting gender

ambiguity.[13] In this moment, she is both male and female.

This gender fluidity sits at the heart of a lot of early Christianity, because Christians were creating a whole new theology from scratch and had a lot of radical ideas. At the core, the male–female hierarchy was never seriously challenged but there were profound discourses for several centuries over the idea of women 'becoming male' or becoming a third gender through their rejection of their female bodies via vows of virginity or extreme ascetism or, as both Perpetua and Felicitas did, miraculous bodily rejections of their children.

The fact that Perpetua and Felicitas are the only two women in the cohort of Carthaginian Christians, and the only two to experience physical miracles, both of which involved them being stripped of the physical manifestations of their motherhood, feels very telling. Femaleness equals sin in a lot of early Christian thought, as demonstrated by Tertullian's hilarious gateway to the devil bit about Eve, while maleness denoted salvation. Importantly, however, being female-bodied or a woman (or assigned female at birth) did not preclude someone from achieving maleness in this new way of thinking.[14] At the same time an equal and opposite discourse arose whereby male Christian teachers could describe themselves as nursing mothers to new catechumens and converts and the concept of 'spiritual motherhood' emerged; a motherhood open to all regardless of gender.[15] A slightly later theological dialogue by the Church Father Methodius, for example, has a female speaker refer to St Paul as 'receiving and conceiving the seeds of life, he who was a child becomes a Church and a mother'.[16]

Christian writing and thinking broke the connection between biological function and gender and blurred the lines between the masculine and the feminine. Christianity queered the hell out of Greco-Roman sex and gender presentation.[17] It made Perpetua female-minded, but male-bodied in her vision, and ready to fight. So she did, engaging in some brutal combat with the Egyptian (whose looks are irrelevant, thank you Perpetua). Specifically, she repeatedly stomped on his head like Edward Norton in *American History X.* She won, met God (playing the referee in this vision and pleasingly giant) and understood from the vision that when she entered the arena in the morning she would not be facing beasts but the devil himself, and that she would win because she would be supported by God and her whole community of fellow Christians. They would all, metaphorically, step on the head of the old enemy. I told you head stepping was a whole thing.[18]

Thus ends Perpetua's short narrative. She woke up on 7 March, fully aware that it was her last morning as a mortal, wrote down this vision and concluded, 'This is the story of what I did the day before the final conflict. But concerning the outcome of that contest, let whoever wishes to write about it, do so.'[19] So someone did. Some have theorised that the anonymous author of the end of Perpetua's story is Tertullian himself but that's because historians love to pretend that we know everyone who lived in the past when we know any more than two names. We're quite excitable as a species really. It probably wasn't Tertullian, as he was too busy being theological, while the author of the last part of Perpetua's story does not seem to be theological at all. He, who we shall ominously call the editor, was, however, very interested in portraying a version of Perpetua quite at odds with the image she created of herself.

When he picked up Perpetua's story, the editor immediately made her more confident and more combative than she made herself. First, the editor portrayed her arguing with the prison overseer who, afraid that the Christians were capable of magic, tried keeping them locked up and unfed. This new Perpetua squared right up to him and demanded that they be treated right. Then, when the Christians were led

out of the prison and towards the arena to prepare for their fate, the editor described them as radiant and trembling with joy, totally lacking in fear. Perpetua he described as 'with a shining face and a calm step, as a wife of Christ and a darling of God.'[20] There is no sense of grieving or fear or pain in this external description of a woman who we know worries and hurts and grieves.

We then get a wonderful thing for the social historian hiding inside every one of us (even if you don't know it): a detailed description of a group of criminals being thrown to the beasts, from their arrival at the arena to their last breath. This is the kind of thing that non-Christians never wrote about, because non-Christians saw criminals as an Other, a not-them, and considered them to be of no interest. Their manner of death might be a fun time, but they as individuals and a group were nothing. So no one recorded their stories. Christians, on the other hand, saw themselves as maintaining strong kinship with condemned Christians and elevated those who died in the arena to martyrs and saints. Their stories were not just important to living Christians, they were the *most* important and every element of their suffering added to the importance.

This is another way in which Christianity resisted and rejected the cultural values of the Roman Empire in the third century; they decided that the most humiliated were the most special. The Romans put a lot of work and thought into making public executions as humiliating, as offensive, as painful and as horrible to the victim as they possibly could. The process of being executed involved multiple occasions of being displayed to mocking, abusive crowds over several days, imprisonment in horrific conditions, being alternately dressed up in entertaining fancy dress and stripped naked, being paraded into the arena before the executions began and then, finally, being tied down to a post or a platform and being attacked by starved, enraged, tormented wild animals while tens of thousands of onlookers cheered. Being executed by the Roman state was a long, monstrous ordeal designed to strip all dignity and humanity from the victim. This worked for centuries, and then Christ's experience of this suffering gave Christians a new way to perceive the ordeal; they saw it not as a mortal humiliation but as a way to emulate Christ and be personally glorified. For certain subsets of Christian believers, the worse the torture, the more public the suffering, the better. The more they suffered in the name of Christianity, the closer to Jesus they got, the closer to God they got and the more likely they were to be hanging out with angels for the rest of eternity.

Christian thought thus turned endurance (*patientia*) of the tortures and humiliations the empire piled upon them into an outstanding virtue and undermined centuries of hard Roman work. For Roman (male) philosophers, *patientia* was a qualified good; enduring pain or suffering was OK but it was also passive and therefore girly. Much better and manlier to take action against whatever pained you, whether by fighting back or taking your own life. In Christianity, however, patiently enduring physical and psychological torture became a way of disconnecting from the (filthy, sinful) body, of emulating Christ and an unqualified, pure, incredibly masculine virtue of the highest order.[21] And this really pissed the Roman Empire off, as monstrous humiliation, suffering and death were really their main thing.

An example of this can be seen in what happened to Perpetua and the gang when they arrived in the arena: a guard attempted to dress them up as priests of Saturn and priestesses of Ceres, basically for comedy purposes. The Romans got very into the idea of spectacular executions, executions which unfolded as miniature plays to heighten the entertainment for the audience. Dressing the victims up in comedy outfits as priests or mythological figures or characters from famous

plays was an easy laugh and added to the shame. Anything to make the show more amusing for the audience and more horrific for the victim. Perpetua, according to the editor, utterly refused to let anyone be dressed up. She furiously told the soldiers that she had made some kind of agreement with the governor when the Christians handed themselves in, and they were thus freed from wearing the costumes when they were paraded in front of the shouting crowds and Hilarianus. As they were paraded into the arena – which was about two-thirds the size of the Colosseum and seated thirty thousand people – and thousands of eyes fell upon them, the men shouted threats at the crowd while Perpetua told Hilarianus 'you judge us, but God will judge you' (in her head, according to the editor). For these acts and their lack of humility, the Christians were whipped in front of the crowd by beast hunters.[22]

For the actual being thrown to the beasts bit, the men and women were separated and each was taken out to be injured by a separate animal. First, the men were presented in turn to a bear, a leopard and a wild boar. There are mosaics in Tunisia depicting, in extraordinarily vivid detail, what this looks like. The victims were tied to posts or to mini two-wheeled chariot things that look uncannily like a Roman version of the upright stretcher Hannibal Lecter was strapped to in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Uncannily. These immobilising devices were held as the beasts were driven towards the victim by trainers with sticks or whips. Furious, frightened and probably starved, the animals tore into the trapped victim. Several of the Tunisian mosaics depict the blood and pain with startling attention to detail for something that was a part of someone's home decor. Things sometimes went wrong though. In this case, Saturus was saved twice (by divine intervention?). First, the wild boar accidentally gored his handler instead of the Christian. Then, the bear refused to leave his cage (possibly tired from having mauled Revocatus and Saturninus already). So, for a third attempt, Saturus was sent out with the leopard which immediately leapt up and bit him so hard, drawing such freakish amounts of blood that it sent the audience into a frenzy of shouting.

Next came Perpetua and Felicitas, sent out together as the final act of the executions part of the day.[23] Executing women was relatively rare and therefore always a great treat for audiences. Initially, the soldiers forced the two young women out onto the sand completely naked, because titillation and degradation were twin aims. However, the two were so young and so visibly post-partum, it freaked the audience out. In particular, Felicitas's breasts leaking the milk she had started producing that very day really upset onlookers. They didn't come here to be upset and they booed until the pair were removed and lightly covered with loose tunics. Sent out again, the audience was now ready for some proper action and was elated to discover that the Christian women were pitted against (brace yourself for the silliness of this one) a very cross wild cow. This was an innovation and, so the editor says, was chosen to match the sex of the beast with the victims and humiliate them further. The cross cow charged them and knocked them down repeatedly, tearing their tunics and hurting them. The editor has Perpetua act the part of a proper maiden, concerned more for her modesty than her life as she covers her legs with her torn clothes and asks for a pin to keep her hair tidy while the furious cow threw them to the ground over and over. Eventually, the audience got bored of watching Bessie push young women over and called for an end. They were led off, whereupon the editor claims that Perpetua had no memory of the experience.

You might have noticed that no one actually died in the arena yet. The most severe injury so far has been to the boar's handler. This, it appears, is common. The beasts existed purely for entertainment purposes for the audience and

dehumanisation and torture purposes for the victim. The prisoner's death at the point of being bitten or gored would be a bonus but was neither required nor expected. Instead, most victims were dragged to a mass grave pit nearby where their throats were quietly cut off screen. As the editor of Perpetua's work says of Saturus when he fell into unconsciousness from blood loss, 'he was thrown with the others in the accustomed place to have his throat cut', which contains such a callous coldness in its industriousness it makes the blood run cold. The Christians, however, had either pissed the Carthaginian audiences off or thoroughly delighted them because the audience demanded that they be brought back and killed on stage 'so that as the sword penetrated the bodies of the martyrs, their eyes might be accomplices to the murder', writes the editor, demonstrating why he never had a further career as a writer. So, gladiators mounted a platform stage in the middle of the arena armed with their swords and, one by one, the Christians were led up the steps to their executioner. They looked the gladiator right in the eyes as he held his *gladius* up to their throats and pushed the thick blade through their carotid artery. Each time, the crowd went wild as the martyr fell in a spurt of blood and was dragged away. When it came to Perpetua's turn, the gladiator drew back and hesitated to raise his sword. So Perpetua (according to the editor) reached out, lifted the blade and guided the tip to her throat, giving him permission to take her life. 'Perhaps', writes the editor, 'such a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not have been killed unless she herself had willed it.'[24]

Of the five people executed that day, only Perpetua and Felicitas became saints. The bodies of all five were rescued by the Christian community and eventually interred in the Basilica Maiorum, but when it came to commemoration and remembering, it was the two women who ended up taking precedence. Tertullian, writing at most six years after their deaths, described Perpetua as 'the most heroic martyr' and demonstrated a clear knowledge of her visions. He even used her visions to argue that only martyrs ascended directly to heaven: 'the sword which guarded the entrance permitted none to go in there except those who had died in Christ and not in Adam.'[25] Every year, the bishop of Carthage (effectively the pope of the African church) read aloud the whole of Perpetua's diary and then gave a sermon. Three of St Augustine's sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas survive, as well as some of Augustine's successor's, the gloriously named Quodvultdeus (what God wants). Perpetua and Felicitas, through their suffering and their witness, were raised to the pantheon of saints, written and rewritten a thousand times over the centuries. They became extraordinary.

What is striking about Perpetua in her own narrative, however, is how ordinary she is. She loves her parents and her child, she misses and worries about her dead brother, she mourns, she aches and she is afraid. Later Christian writers, when describing martyrs, make them outstanding, unusual, unfeeling brides of Christ and put them out of reach of normal people. Those depictions make it hard to understand how Christianity felt, how it worked and how it attracted more adherents. Perpetua's unique narrative answers these questions, because it shows us what appealed to her about Christian faith in the context of her brother's death; it shows us that resisting the Roman Empire was hard and scary and radical but *glorious*. Resistance through martyrdom felt majestic and magnificent. And it offered viewers a radically different model of successful resistance. Within the Roman worldview, humiliating death in the arena meant a conclusive win for the empire; the tiny human opponent left crushed by its unstoppable machinery. Within a Christian worldview, however, humiliating torment and death meant the martyrs achieved their aim. They imitated Christ, they refused to submit to Roman

hegemony, and they died with dignity and glory and blazing with delicious righteousness. They became male by enduring like their God did, they were awesome in the literal sense while they did it, and this was the strongest resistance of all.

Perpetua and Felicitas were not the first Christian martyrs, nor did they suffer the most (Google Blandina if you want some really horribly eroticised torture), but their experience clearly shows a tipping point in Roman history, as first-person Christian voices emerged, spread around the empire and offered a new and very attractive way to live. It offered a way to feel unique, to be special, to be saved – especially for women. Through Christianity, women could be praised, could be celebrated, could be public and not like other girls and, if they suffered hard enough, they could shed their womanhood altogether.

Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea

222 CE

Mothers of the Whole Human Race

Throughout this book, I have occasionally referred to the Pax Romana without ever telling you what it was, but now we return to Rome as it is coming to an end so it's time we looked directly at it. Pax Romana refers, very simplistically, to the 250-year period when the Roman Empire was mostly stable, peaceful and secure under a monarch. Apart from a couple of short-lived outbreaks of civil war, for the most part people who lived away from the borders lived lives untouched by military violence and unrest, where they could travel, trade and raise their kids mostly unmolested. That period began with the ascension of Augustus in 27 BCE and ended twenty-five emperors later with the death of child emperor Severus Alexander in 235 CE. Following Alexander, the Pax Romana collapsed into civil wars which consumed the empire for a century and a half. The circumstances that led to Rome's first child emperors and the end of the Pax Romana were brought about by one extraordinary woman.

Under no circumstances was Julia Maesa ever *supposed* to end her life as Roman king-maker, crowning not just one but two rulers of the empire. When she was born, in May 160 CE, Roman power and authority resided in the city of Rome within the limited pool of Italian aristocrats. The Six (Justice for Lucius Verus) Good Emperors had slightly widened the pool of potential powerholders and the Latin aristocratic grip on Senatorial and military power had become slightly less white-knuckle tight, but the Roman world remained a strict ethnicity-based oligarchy. Between the death of Marcus Aurelius's rubbish son Commodus in 192 CE (when Julia Maesa turned thirty-two) and her death in 224 CE (at the age of about fifty-four), the Roman world changed completely. Like a spoon in a French press, Commodus's death stirred up all the tensions latent in the whole Roman system of government and set in motion a series of nightmares.

The first three decades of Julia Maesa's life were unremarkable. She was born in Emesa (now Homs) in Syria. For the past few decades, Homs has been synonymous with crisis and destruction, but in the second century CE, Emesa sat at the centre of three trade arteries and was a rich, multicultural merchant city. It made its money from taxing trade passing through on the Incense Road (from Yemen and Oman), the Spice Route (from Africa and the Persian Gulf and Java), and – of course – the Silk Road, stretching across Asia and India, all the way to China, and from pilgrims travelling to the great temple of El-Gabal, aka Elagabal. You might now know a little of where Maesa's story is heading. El-Gabal was a very ancient god, possibly Phoenician and associated with the sun. Emesa had the main El-Gabal temple because they held his cultic representation. Unlike Greek and Roman gods, El-Gabal had no human form or statue; he was represented by a large, black conical stone. He also had a hereditary priesthood of El-Gabal, passed from father to son, because it had taken the place of the pre-Roman monarchy. Rather than become normal people with no power at all in the Roman Empire (ew), the old kings had slid themselves sideways into the priesthood, made that hereditary and

effectively continued to be the local power base outside of the Roman bureaucracy. Canny. In 160 CE, Julia Maesa's father, Julius Bassianus, held that position.

Maesa grew up in Emesa, the wealthy and privileged daughter of a city leader, in a rich and exciting city just a stone's throw from Antioch. Via her father she held Roman citizenship – hence the Julia bit – and so she married a Roman soldier, Gaius Julius Avitus Alexianus. Avitus was also Syrian, of Equestrian status, and had joined the Roman army as the prefect of an auxiliary cohort from Petra. This made him the same rank as Sulpicia Lepidina's husband Flavius Cerialis in Britain, though Maesa and Avitus were more embedded in the social life of Emesa itself than solely focused on their military home. It will be important later, though, to remember that Maesa married a military man and was established in military life and to remember what military life on the outskirts of the Roman Empire looked like when there was no war. It was familial, domestic, social and religious, and soldiers developed strong bonds with one another and those they lived with. During those years, Maesa and Avitus had two daughters named Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea. And that would have been their life, lived as local gentry at the top of their regional food chain, removed from the politics and decadence of empire. Except that Maesa had a younger sister who married unexpectedly very, very well. Or poorly, depending on your perspective.

Julia Domna was Julius Bassianus's youngest daughter and she caught the eye of a Roman general named Septimius Severus. Severus hailed from Leptis Magna in Libya (now the capital, Tripoli). His mother had been an Italian woman of good Roman pedigree whose family had emigrated to Libya and married Libyan elites; his father, meanwhile, had Phoenician ancestors but the family considered themselves thoroughly Roman.[1] Severus himself had travelled to Rome, got himself initiated into the Senate and taken up a decent career, got married and spent his days travelling around to different posts in the empire doing Roman bureaucracy at people. At some point, he travelled through Emesa, did his duty as a visiting authority and met the local elites and endured the kind of thing that local elites force upon visiting dignitaries (hand shaking, ribbon cutting, excruciating conversation about the weather and so on and so forth) and he met with Julius Bassianus. There, he also met Bassianus's daughter, Domna. Nothing happened for a while. Severus rotated out and went to Gaul whereupon his wife died. The story goes that Severus consulted his horoscope to find himself a new wife and Julia Domna came up as having the most auspicious stars. This story comes from a book which is, effectively, a work of fiction.

The *Historia Augusta* is a work so confusing that Roman historians have set computers on it to try and crack its secrets. The *Historia Augusta* claims to be a series of biographies written in the fourth century CE by various authors, but it also lies about itself, lies about when it was written and contains a great many overt and unconvincing falsehoods and wild mistakes. It is not a particularly trustworthy source, and this is how it paints Severus: as a superstitious African, addicted to astrology. Like a second-century CE Ronald Reagan. However it happened, Severus proposed to Domna, she said yes (or her dad did) and in 193 CE she said goodbye to her sister and nieces and shipped from Syria to Gaul and then to Pannonia (Hungary) to take up her new life as a Senatorial wife under the emperor Pertinax, a man even I regularly forget existed.

Publius Helvius Pertinax ruled the Roman Empire for precisely eighty-eight days in 192–193 CE and he is remembered mostly for overthrowing Commodus – Commodus being the guy played by Joaquin Phoenix in *Gladiator* for reference – and kicking off the inauspiciously named Year of the Five Emperors. Eighty-seven

days after the Praetorian Guard made Pertinax emperor, they got fed up with his old-school hardass disciplinarian act and killed him. They then did a genuinely extraordinary thing and held an auction at the gates of the Praetorian Camp, auctioning the role of emperor to the highest bidder. A bunch of murderers selling off access to a position whose last two holders they had personally murdered does not sound like a hugely attractive buy to me, but to Didius Julianus (or J. Diddy as I like to call him) that sounded brilliant and he paid big for the right to be emperor for the whole eight weeks he spent being regularly stoned by the people of Rome. Upon hearing of the imperial challenges in Rome, three generals in different parts of the empire simultaneously made a bid for the big chair: Clodius Albinus in Britain, Pescennius Niger in Syria and our new friend Septimius Severus in Pannonia. Amusingly, J. Diddy repeatedly sent people to Severus to try and talk him out of his rebellion, and every single one of them instantly defected to Severus. This personal popularity, combined with some genuine military skill and a bit of trickery, meant that, by the end of 193 CE, Septimius Severus was the first African emperor of Rome, Julia Domna was empress and Julia Maesa was now related to the imperial family.

The first thing that Severus did was announce himself as being Marcus Aurelius's adopted son; an impressive move given that Marcus Aurelius had died fully thirteen years previously. Such was the power of the Divine Marcus Aurelius to be adopting adult men from beyond the grave. This made people laugh as a ridiculously transparent attempt by Severus to make his reign look like a continuation of the Antonine Dynasty – but a decade too late. However, it didn't harm him. Severus's reign lasted a magnificent eighteen years, during which time he did many good imperial things – like wars and introducing an oil dole and creating a nationalised postal service – and a lot of less successful things, such as 'repairing' the Colossi of Memnon and ruining everyone's good time in the Pax Romana. He also heavily invested in building Leptis Magna into a glorious Roman city while bringing people from Leptis and Emesa to Rome and promoting them to very high office as part of his imperial court. For the first time, the imperial court was not composed of Latin speakers. Severus was occasionally teased for his 'African accent', and he appears to have had a bit of a hang-up about it. He allegedly refused to let his sister enter the court because he considered her poor Latin to be an embarrassment.[2] Severus probably spoke Punic and Greek as his first languages, while Domna and Maesa spoke Greek and Aramaic. The names Domna and Maesa are both of Arabic origin. Although the European Romans thought that Domna was a contraction of *domina* (mistress), it actually derives from the Arabic word *dumayana*.[†] Severus's loyalty to his family by marriage brought Maesa and her daughters to Rome and Avitus into the Senate, where he led a very decent career. He became consul in 200 CE, making Maesa a woman of consular rank, and then he served as governor of Raetia (Switzerland and Bavaria).

Severus made Domna a significant part of his reign and she is remembered as a highly capable empress with a particular interest in art and philosophy. Her acolytes often referred to her having a circle of intellectuals in her household. She also gave Severus two sons, very close together in age, who are now known as Caracalla and Geta. Domna's sister Maesa, meanwhile, settled into life at the very top of the empire, raising her daughters, marrying them well and, quite possibly, engaging with her sister, her husband and her brother-in-law in the running of the complex empire. Certainly, she enjoyed the many perks of being a member of the imperial family. This wasn't just a matter of having so much money she could Scrooge McDuck-dive into it if she wanted, or access to anything she wanted, or the best of

everything in the entire empire from foods to Chinese silks. She was also separated from the hoi polloi of everyone else in the empire. She sat in the imperial box for games and plays; she was preceded by lictors carrying *fasces* wherever she went.[†] If she travelled with her sister, there were twelve lictors and a man carrying the imperial banner, making them effectively a procession every time they moved.[3] After thirty years of living the life of a local elite, Maesa found out what it was to be a *real*, global elite, to have crowds of strangers hail your sister as a goddess and to have entire provinces at your fingertips. And she liked it.

This kind of life utterly warps a person's perspective on the world. As a member of the imperial family, Maesa very suddenly and for no good reason became one of the most famous people in the Roman world. People she had never met and never would had opinions on her, people gawked when she left the house, stared when she entered a theatre; anonymity was stripped from her. Research into modern celebrity shows that this experience of the world utterly changes a person. It is horrifying and addictive in equal measure. Maesa found herself one of the few people in the world subjected to the tsunami of attention that comes with being royal. In one of the few studies of the experience of modern celebrity, an anonymous A-Lister described it like this:

> The swell of people, the requests, the letters, the e-mails, the greetings on the street, the people in cars, the honking of the horns, the screaming of your name. A whole world comes to you that you have no idea is there. It just comes from nowhere. And it starts to build and build like a small tornado, and it's coming at you, and coming at you, and by the time it gets to you, it's huge and can sweep you off your feet and take you away and put you in a world that has no reality whatsoever.[4]

For Maesa and her family, you can replace the emails with petitions – people desperate to get to her so she can get to Domna who can get to the emperor. People wanting favours, wanting access, wanting a bit of her because of her relationship to Severus. Fame distorts the world, and in return the famous person becomes distorted. Another contributor to the celebrity study mused, 'I mean, the more famous you get in Hollywood, the more close you get to Caligula or Nero.'[5] And that's the closest you will ever get to literary foreshadowing from me.

Severus died quite suddenly while on a trip to Britain in 211 CE, and he left his throne jointly to his two sons, who hated one another. Within a matter of months, Caracalla, aged about twenty-three, had personally stabbed his little brother to death so that he could be sole emperor. The murder involved Caracalla wrenching Geta from Domna's arms and murdering him while she sobbed.[6] Apart from the murdering, though, life largely continued in the imperial family as normal. Maesa became a grandmother in 204 CE and again in 208 CE so she now had two bouncing baby grandsons to care for and, as Caracalla showed absolutely no signs of being interested in women, Maesa came to see her grandbabies as the future of Severus's dynasty.

Caracalla is so called because he obsessively wore military clothes and was particularly fond of a Gallic hooded top called the *caracellus* – martial life was very much his preference. Hanging out with men being incredibly manly in a Roman sense, all sweaty and covered in the blood of his enemies, was his ideal life and the only woman he was ever rumoured to have shagged was his mother. By whoever wrote the *Historia Augusta.* Who thought Domna was his stepmother so massive pinch of salt there. It's not hard to see that Maesa began succession

planning on his behalf, envisioning that he might adopt one of her grandsons in the vein of Hadrian and Trajan. Unfortunately for Maesa, Caracalla was so generally horrible that, at the age of just twenty-nine, he was stabbed to death while having a poo on the Parthian border by a disgruntled soldier and replaced on the throne by an unknown called Macrinus.

Caracalla died on 8 April 217 CE after six years of fucking up being emperor, because it is a truth universally acknowledged that every boy who inherits the throne will fuck it up, and Macrinus's ascension appeared to herald yet another new era in Roman politics. After twenty-six years of being Roman royalty, and recently widowed, Maesa, her daughters and her grandchildren were removed from the Palatine Hill and deported back to Emesa. Domna, who had accompanied her son on a campaign to the east, was also returned to Emesa. The two sisters, now in their fifties, found themselves back in the city they had left as much younger adults. They returned as mothers and grandmothers, both as widows, and as women irrevocably changed by having gained and lost an entire empire. Neither could stand the horror of returning to a relatively private life. They returned to Emesa like one-hit-wonder pop stars returning to jobs at Tesco but turned up to 11,000. Neither could handle it, but they reacted in very, very different ways. Domna died. Potentially, she took her own life by starving herself to death. Stripped of her status, her children, her husband, her lictors, her security, her retinue and her wealth, Domna had nothing so she escaped the mortal plane.[7]

Maesa, however, still had her daughters, still had her grand-kids, and she had an iron will and so she came up with a plan. Her hopes lay in her oldest grandson, son of her daughter Soaemias and a Syrian-Roman aristocrat, Sextus Varius Marcellus. Their child, Varius Avitus Bassianus, had been the closest Caracalla ever came to having an heir. Avitus's father had acted as prefect of the military treasury and governor of Numidia (Algeria) until he died in 215 CE, while little Avitus Bassianus had travelled around with Caracalla. He appears in an inscription in Turkey alongside the emperor in 214 CE, and there's a theory that Caracalla might have adopted him in a halfhearted sort of way at some point, maybe.[8] In 217 CE, Avitus was about thirteen years old and the only member of the family thrilled to be in Emesa. He had taken up the role his grandfather had bequeathed him and become perhaps the most enthusiastic priest that El-Gabal had ever seen. He leaned into his new position so hard that very soon people associated him exclusively with his god. He is now known as Elagabalus.[†]

Elagabalus took to being the priest of El-Gabal like seagulls take to stealing chips. He loved the worship, he loved the rites, and he loved the ritual outfit. The outfit consisted of a purple and gold Ionian chiton tunic and lots of jewellery. A chiton is long-sleeved and floor-length and looks like a very expensive version of what a women's magazine would describe as a 'throw on buffet dress' to be worn with a pair of complicated shoes. Comfy and sexy. In fact, I'd quite like one. Elagabalus also appears to have had a genuine spiritual devotion to the god. Had he been left alone in Emesa to dedicate his life to El-Gabal and cause some local scandals, he probably would have been perfectly happy but, unfortunately, his family had other ideas. And this is where we have to come back to Maesa's early adulthood as the wife of a military prefect in Emesa and all the military connections she had as a result of that decade she spent living and working with the Roman legions in Syria. Those connections, those relationships and that trust she had built up as a member of the local ruling elite, as a member of the military community, and now as a member of an unfairly ousted imperial family, were about to come in handy.

Pretty much immediately upon their return to Emesa, Maesa, her daughter and Maesa's foster-son Gannys started spreading rumours that Elagabalus was not Caracalla's first cousin once removed, as it appeared, but was in fact the dead emperor's biological son. Portraiture does not particularly bear this out to my eye, but apparently IRL Elagabalus looked an awful look like Caracalla, and so Maesa told trusted friends in the army that Caracalla had slept with both her daughters while they lived in the palace (sounds fake but OK) and had impregnated Soaemias without her husband's knowledge. Thus, she insinuated, the very handsome young teen they saw was in fact the rightful heir to the Roman throne.

Very quickly this information spread throughout the Syrian legions, along with the rumour that Maesa had enormous stashes of imperial wealth that she would willingly use to reward anyone who helped her grandchild take his rightful throne. This is the version that a lively historian called Herodian (who might also be Syrian) tells, and he is a contemporary source.[9] A second contemporary source is an extremely fragmented and half-lost book by the Senator Cassius Dio who served under the emperors from Septimius Severus onwards. Dio's version of events deliberately erases Maesa and Soaemias and claims they had no knowledge of what happened next, blaming the whole thing on the child Gannys.[10]

What happened next is this: Maesa and Soaemias along with their entourage bundled poor Elagabalus up and led him out of the city, away from his beloved temple and into the camp of the Legio III Gallica, where the gates opened for them. They entered the camp and were immediately celebrated as returning heroes, with Elagabalus – to his possible terror – hailed as emperor. Within a few months of her ousting from Rome, Maesa had started a military rebellion. This has been hard for a lot of historians to get their heads around; how could a woman – a lovely grandmother no less! – start a coup with the support of basically no one but some children? The ancient historians believed that the soldiers held a great fondness for Caracalla as one of them, a soldier's emperor, and this probably has weight. But it's not all of it. I think their confusion comes from their forgetting how embedded Maesa had been in Emesan military life before she was swept away to imperial fame and luxury. The soldiers she allied with were not strangers to her; they were friends and bunkmates who trusted her. The soldiers undoubtedly also had a mercenary element to their sudden support for this wee kid because supporting a successful claimant to the throne always came with significant cash benefits, but it was also risky. Soldiers usually supported beloved generals who had proven skills in battle and leadership, not wide-eyed children.

And Elagabalus was a child. He was fourteen years old when a legion proclaimed him emperor at the instigation of his grandmother and Gannys, a 'youth who had not yet reached manhood' and he became the first of a very tiny number of child rulers of the Roman Empire.[11] Legally, it must be noted, Elagabalus had undergone the Roman ceremony of adulthood and held some praetorships so *technically* under Roman law Elagabalus was an adult man. But, realistically, the kid was a kid. And this is perhaps the most impressive part of Maesa's rebellion to me: she didn't just convince the legionaries and auxiliaries to support her cause and the cause of her family to put a new emperor on the throne, she convinced them to follow a teenager whose primary skill was being very pretty. And dancing. As a gambit, this was a real risk and might have destroyed any credibility she ever had in Emesa. It's easy to imagine a scenario where her rumour-spreading about her daughters ends up with her being the local oddball rather than the local hero. But, Herodian says, she was willing to risk everything rather than live in obscurity.[12] And, because the troops trusted and liked Maesa, they went with her and risked

their own lives for the promise of glory.

News quickly reached Macrinus because he was in Antioch, a mere 124 miles away. Maesa's rebellion moved so fast that Macrinus hadn't even had time to try and leave for Rome before someone turned up to tell him that a new emperor had been proclaimed. Macrinus, reasonably, assumed that a rebellion led by three women and two teenage boys posed no particular risk to him as a Roman general, so he sent a small contingent of soldiers led by a prefect, Julianus, to put it down. Herodian tells a great story of the Emesan legion responding to the appearance of Julianus's troops by simply displaying Elagabalus on the camp walls. Julianus's troops, apparently, were so overcome by his handsomeness and likeness to Caracalla that they immediately defected, lopped Julianus's head off and sent it back to Macrinus with a note. This led to rumours spreading through Macrinus's camp that the new Augustus was the real deal and in little groups they began to slip off, hike across Syria and appear day by day at Maesa's door asking to join in.[13] And so, their legion grew until they could fight Macrinus. And win. Which they did, on 18 June 218 CE. Just fourteen months after Caracalla had been stabbed in the dick and Maesa had been thrown onto the streets, Maesa was a member of the imperial family again and, this time, she was in charge.

Maesa moved back to Rome, though it took a while, eager to restart her life in the capital of the world.[14] She arrived, with Elagabalus in tow as emperor, in 219 CE. Rome had not seen its emperor for almost six years, though hilariously Elagabalus had sent a painting of himself ahead so they'd know what he looked like when he arrived. The Senate had never even met Macrinus. Big shifts in imperial direction no longer took place on the Senate floor or the Forum, or even in Europe, but in Syria and Asia, and among the troops. The Senate would never have its real imperial power back again. This was the beginning of the Roman Empire turning its attention away from Europe and towards West Asia and the east Mediterranean and it did not please the Roman Senate, who never lost their belief that Rome was the natural centre of the world. The arrival of Elagabalus pleased them even less. Because Elagabalus turned up, now fifteen years old, still obstinately in a priestly outfit of a pure silk chiton and carrying the big black stone of El-Gabal. The Senate were, even more obstinately, still clinging to the thousand-year-old woollen toga and knee-length, short-sleeved tunic as the *only* appropriate clothing for a Roman politician. Jazzing up the tunic or the toga with a stripe or a splash of block colour could just about be stomached, but being too hot, quite itchy and overburdened with fabric (a toga is about two metres long) was *fundamental* to Roman Senatorial identity. The suffering was the *point*. So when Elagabalus turned up in a Chinese silk maxi dress laden with gold embroidery and insisting that he never wore wool because it was horrible, they near fell off their chairs. The fact that he was wearing a tiara and necklaces and had brought the stone of El-Gabal to Rome with him served only to make the Senate's knees weak with horror.

The stories about Elagabalus in the sources are as wild as Roman stories can be, ranging from decadence to fluid gender presentation, to making actors Senators, entirely random killings, the heavy presence of women in the imperial court and his insistence on subordinating the ancient Roman gods to his ancient Phoenician god.[15] They fill up pages of deeply contemptuous words from his contemporary Cassius Dio, who loathed Elagabalus with a disgust that is genuinely quite shocking. Dio describes Elagabalus, his mother and Maesa as classic stereotypes of Oriental decadence, despotism and effeminacy. The idea that 'the Orient' was a place of vice and corruption lay embedded deep in the Roman psyche; Octavian used it to get rid of Antony and Cleopatra and it never went away. The east, they

thought, was soft and barbaric and deeply effeminate and worshipped humans as gods, unlike the good European Romans who were hard and civilised and masculine and politely waited until humans were dead to worship them. The fact that Elagabalus was regularly femme-presenting and devoted to El-Gabal only reinforced every stereotype they held about their imagined east and it repulsed the Roman Senate and the Praetorian Guard who were steeped in their own idea of correct behaviour. When Elagabalus allowed his mother Soaemias into the Senate house – a space perceived as being inherently and religiously masculine – the inhabitants of Rome saw a gender-based violation that they found incredibly hard to handle.[16] Dio refers to Elagabalus mostly as Sardanapalus, a legendary king of Assyria who was described by Roman writers as a bi-sexual, cross-dressing, gender-fucking hedonist who brought down an entire empire with his love of luxury.[17]

These tales have echoed down the ages into a version of the Severan Dynasty which depicted them as Syrian interlopers into Europe who brought only decadence and decay while proper Romans like Cassius Dio tried to hold on to proper Roman values.[18] Edward Gibbon, constant provider of great lines, sighs about Elagabalus and his family, 'Rome was at length humbled beneath the effeminate luxury of Oriental despotism.'[19] In this interpretation, the Severans are inherently un-Roman, in part because they are mostly women. They stand in opposition to The Roman. The Roman, is, implicitly, a white, European man. That such an interpretation is fatally flawed should be obvious enough from the fact that Dio himself was from Bithynia in modern Turkey.

Maesa, Mamaea, Soaemias and Elagabalus were all Romans, with Roman citizenship for several generations; they paid Roman taxes and engaged in Roman politics. Maesa married a Roman prefect who served in the Roman army, they sacrificed to the Roman gods and lived in a Roman province and were as Roman as Roman could be. They never lived outside the borders of the empire and, in case we forgot why we are here, were literally the rulers of the Roman Empire working in its best interests. But Maesa will rarely be called Roman, mostly because of the difficult religious behaviour of her grandson. To both contemporary and modern viewers, Maesa and her family force uncomfortable questions about what being a Roman was. Dio decided that being a Roman emperor meant adhering to the norms of the city of Rome; the norms of cities within the Roman Empire did not count.

Maesa appears to have felt as Dio did, and this is why she managed to make it through the ancient sources largely unscathed by terrible criticism. She identified as a Roman from Emesa, in much the same way as Cerialis and Lepidina appear to have seen themselves as Romans from Batavia, with an adherence to Roman religion and gender norms. So she looked on in combined frustration and horror, but acted as the prime Augusta of the reign, attempting to hold the brand new dynasty and Rome's first child emperor together with pure force of will. She is presented in the imperial propaganda over and above Elagabalus's mother, Soaemias, or any of Elagabalus's multiple (and very short-lived) wives, with all the traditional high honours of an empress. During the reign, Maesa was represented on eighteen per cent of Elagabalus's coins, while poor Soaemias got only seven per cent.[20] Maesa is depicted on coins as the mother of the camps (*mater castrorum*) and the mother of the Senate (*mater senatus*), as Juno, and as the personifications of Felicitas (good luck), Pudicitia (chastity) and Fecunditas (you can probably work that one out). Soaemias, meanwhile, gets presented as a strange and unusual form of Venus (Venus Caelestis). She doesn't even get to be called the mother of the emperor. Harsh. The numismatic portrayals line up with their portrayal in

Herodian's history, where Maesa frets constantly about Elagabalus's behaviour alienating the armies. Maesa appears to have wanted to be a traditional empress in the European mould, just as her sister had been, while Soaemias and Elagabalus wanted to continue to celebrate their Emesan religion, identity and culture.

The Romans of Rome had no patience for emperors acting outside of the narrowly defined rules of both masculinity and Proper Romanness, which valued Roman tradition, Stoic masculinity and the ancient ways of the city of Rome above all. They also weren't keen on rapists and bastards being emperor, and Elagabalus was allegedly both. He was accused of the sexual assault of a Vestal Virgin, which would have had him executed in another time.[21] Maesa, from her decades living in Rome, knew this and understood the risks Elagabalus and Soaemias were taking. She had worked hard and risked a lot to return the Severans to the throne and to get herself back into a position of true imperial power and she understood the game of Roman thrones. She did her best, according to Herodian, to moderate her family's actions, with extremely limited success. After four years of dealing with Elagabalus, watching him and his mother piss away their own popularity on the whims and fancies of an unexpectedly headstrong teenager, Maesa once again found herself having to come up with a plan that would save her dynasty.

You may remember that Maesa had two daughters and each of those daughters had a child. Her other daughter was Julia Mamaea, whose son was the very young Severus Alexander. Mamaea appears to have taken after her mother far more than Soaemias did. While Soaemias apparently indulged Elagabalus, and enabled a lot of his more unpalatable behaviour, Mamaea kept a tight grip on little Alexander. Alexander, being a prepubescent boy of about twelve, and a good kid by all accounts, remained untouched by Elagabalus's unpopularity because Mamaea wouldn't let Elagabalus anywhere near him. So, Maesa forced Elagabalus to adopt Severus Alexander as an heir in order to present a sense of continuity and dynasty and try to wrestle back some control of the reign.

Initially, Maesa hoped that this act would demonstrate to the armies and the Senate that better things were coming, and that there would be a future to the Severan Dynasty. She forgot, however, about Elagabalus's temper. What Elagabalus saw in Maesa's sensible political plan was not an attempt to protect the dynasty of which he was a part, but an attempt to undermine him personally. Elagabalus, now about seventeen years old, hated Alexander and became enormously suspicious of the poor kid. And, because he was a tyrannical Roman emperor and this is what tyrannical Roman emperors did, Elagabalus began making noises about getting rid of his own adopted son. Of all the things that have ever been said about Elagabalus, no one has ever suggested he was smart. His attempt on Severus Alexander's life utterly enraged the Praetorian Guard, who loved Alexander for unclear reasons. The Praetorians immediately rioted and threatened to kill Elagabalus, forcing Maesa to pick a side between her two daughters and her grandchildren. She chose to act with extraordinary ruthlessness; she had, according to Dio, come to hate Elagabalus because he threatened her position and she lived in terror of once again losing all that she had gained. The life of a private citizen simply was not for her. And so, she and Mamaea spirited Severus Alexander to safety and allowed the Praetorian Guard to murder Elagabalus and Soaemias. After less than four years of ruling the empire (badly), in 222 CE, Elagabalus was butchered with his mother, decapitated, dragged through the city and thrown into the Tiber. Maesa, the architect of the entire reign, escaped unscathed.

That Maesa survived the overthrow of Elagabalus, despite being one hundred per cent responsible for putting him on the throne, running his administration and

being *the* female face of the entire reign, should amaze you. Not only did she manage to escape the slaughter of Elagabalus's friends and associates(including, interestingly, the leader of the Praetorians), but she also managed to engineer the coup so that the Praetorian Guard immediately and unhesitatingly hailed Severus Alexander as emperor. Moreover, she was able to place her own choice of candidate in the position of Praetorian Prefect, to ensure there would be no more trouble there. Thus, Julia Maesa, at the age of sixty-two, led her *second* successful coup in five years. She convinced the hard-line, terrifying men of the Praetorian Guard – some of whom had now personally killed two emperors – to salute a middle school student in a toga. A cute, gentle, very nerdy middle school student at that (Severus Alexander has the exact energy of Arthur the Aardvark). And she did all this while almost certainly suffering the hot flushes, lack of sleep and sheer misery of the menopause. If that isn't aspirational behaviour, I don't know what is.

Maesa, presumably exhausted from a life containing a whole lot of adventures, passed away of unknown causes about a year into Alexander's reign. She lived just long enough to fully dismantle Elagabalus's entire administration, undo all his religious reforms, send the icon of El-Gabal back to Emesa, fire all his political appointments and effectively hit reset on the entire Severan Dynasty to re-emphasise the traditions of the city of Rome and to remove all the Emesan aspects of Elagabalus's reign. Then she slipped off the mortal coil. And into an immortal one. Naturally, because it was traditional, Julia Maesa, daughter of a regional priest, became a goddess upon her death.[22] The Divine Julia Maesa. You may wish to consider a sacrifice to her. Into her shoes immediately stepped her daughter, Alexander's mother, Julia Mamaea, a woman who managed to get herself hailed as The Mother of the Whole Human Race.

Mamaea was probably in her forties when she became the mother of the emperor. Her aunt Domna had become empress just as she was entering her teens, having spent her childhood in Emesa, whereupon she was swept off with mum and dad to travel the world and live in a palace. Basically, she lived every teenage girl's *Princess Diaries* dream. There is a decent chance that she was even subjected to a sudden onslaught of 'princess lessons' in etiquette, elocution and deportment as she arrived in Rome, one of the imperial family's newest eligible bachelorettes. Her first husband was a consul whose name is lost, but he died and she then married an Equestrian named Gessius Marcianus. Marcianus was also Syrian, from Arca, and never became a Senator, suggesting that no one ever expected very much from Julia Mamaea. She had two children, a daughter and then Alexander who was born Gessius Alexianus Bassianus.[23] Alexander was nine when Caracalla found himself bleeding to death in a field and Macrinus sent the whole family back to Emesa, and ten when they started their journey back to Rome. He and Mamaea watched with ever increasing horror as Elagabalus reigned and Mamaea learned that teenage sons require a short leash if they are to be kept colouring within the lines of Roman monarchy. She kept a close eye on him under Elagabalus's rule and did not stop once he became emperor at the age of fourteen.

Mamaea comes off reasonably well in the sources for a woman who ruled the emperor. This is in part because one of the surviving sources was written by a man very close to her inner circle. Cassius Dio, the man who wrote with such disgust about barbarians in the Senate and Elagabalus's foreign religion, held his second consulship under Severus Alexander and then served as governor of both Upper Pannonia and Bithynia.[24] When Dio says, therefore, that Mamaea governed well, choosing the best and wisest men as advisers for Alexander, he has a tiny bit of a bias.[25] Dio clearly spent time, both personally and professionally, with Alexander

and Mamaea and is therefore very reluctant to write about them other than to demonstrate that he liked them. He finished writing his books of history before the end of Alexander's reign so it's plausible that he didn't want to write truthfully about the people who had patronised him, because Herodian portrays Mamaea as domineering and Alexander as a weedy little mummy's boy.

In Herodian's telling, Mamaea took total control of Alexander's reign and his every action. She kept him in the palace under guard at all times unless he was hearing cases and working as a judge so that he would not be able to even think about indulging a vice. She surrounded him with very conservative older teachers and advisers who kept him firmly on an educational track she approved of and would not let anyone she suspected of being a flatterer or a groupie within ten feet of him.[26] In her defence, she was probably right to do so. Young men raised to be emperor, or who became emperor young, had so far become vile little tyrants without exception in Rome because the culture of fame, flattery and extravagance surrounding them effectively broke their squishy brain meat. I refer you back to our anonymous A-Lister on the warping effects of fame and adulation. Every kid who inherited the Roman throne from Caligula to Caracalla got stabbed because they always got moulded into pricks by the circles they grew up in. Mamaea had watched this happen to Caracalla and to Elagabalus and she refused to let it happen to her son. Her son, she insisted, would be a good emperor.

More importantly, for our purposes here, Mamaea was a good empress. A very common belief about women in Roman culture that we have come across over and over already was that they are incapable of ruling because they are naturally cruel and decadent. A trope of Roman literature that we saw when Tacitus and Dio were writing about Cartimandua and Boudicca is a woman taking power and killing everyone around her – particularly other women – out of either jealousy or petty cruelty. Mamaea is accused of just one moment of what we might call female temper, regarding Alexander's wife. She married him off to a young girl, the excessively named Gneia Seia Herennia Sallustia Barbia Orbiana, in 225 CE when he was maybe sixteen.[27] Herodian claims that Mamaea became instantly jealous of the girl and exiled her to Libya because she couldn't bear another Augusta taking her place in Alexander's heart. She then, allegedly, heard that Orbiana's father was slagging her off in the Praetorian camp and had him executed. Alexander, meanwhile, silently and passively allowed all of this to happen. The story sounds like classic woman in power libel, and the fact that Orbiana's father was in the Praetorian Camp telling stories at all suggests that something treasonous happened but was left unexplained in the surviving sources. The *Historia Augusta*, for what it's worth, says that the father-in-law attempted to kill Alexander, prompting the divorce and the execution.[28]

The other 'crime' that Mamaea is accused of, unexpectedly, is stinginess. The sources give an impression of Mamaea hoarding money like Smaug and hissing at anyone who might try and take a penny from her. A fourth-century work of mini biographies says that she wouldn't throw away leftovers at dinner but saved them to eat the next day. Roman aristocrats seem to have thought this was genuinely bizarre behaviour.[29] It's possibly worth noting that when men saved money and lived simply, they were considered to be highly moral but it's different for girls. But when 'eats leftovers' is the worst thing you can say about someone, I think they're doing OK. For her efforts Mamaea was rewarded with her son's adoring devotion and with titles: mother of the camps, mother of the emperor, mother of the whole human race, mistress of the inhabited world.[30]

Mamaea and Alexander ruled Rome happily for ten years and would probably have continued for another ten had they not got caught up in war. In 231–3 CE, Alexander and Mamaea were forced to trek to Asia to fight the brand new and newly encroaching Sassanid Empire, which they just about managed to do despite hating every second of it and not really winning anything. So, when things started kicking off on the northern frontier in Germany, with the very beginnings of the frontier invasions which would dog the empire for the next couple of centuries, Alexander was not thrilled about the prospect of more marching about and misery in the mud. Mamaea, for all her skill in administration and ruling, also sucked at warfare. It turned out that the life of judging and meetings and admin in lovely Rome was the life they were made for, but the Roman Empire didn't work like that. In the Roman Empire, the emperor had to be a general too, a fearless and brilliant leader in battle. So when Alexander announced to his troops – already fed up from the boring, depressing war in Mesopotamia and Alexander's overt lack of interest in them and their desire for glory – that he had taken a diplomatic route and made a peace treaty so they wouldn't have to fight the Germans, they lost their minds. Never had an emperor misunderstood his own army so badly. Deprived of their purpose, their glory and their loot, the soldiers considered him to be a coward, led by a cowardly woman – because of course they blamed Mamaea – and a disgrace to the martial eminence of Rome. Led by a soldier with a name that is fun to say out loud, Maximinus Thrax, the Legio XXII Primigenia revolted. They burst in on Alexander, now twenty-six, embracing Mamaea as he wept. Her emotional state is not reported so you can imagine for yourself how you think a woman who ruled the empire peacefully with her son for fourteen years, including personal involvement in two coups and two wars, might respond to her imminent, bloody death. The pair were slaughtered together, and the Severan Dynasty of Julia Maesa was ended.

The deaths of Mamaea and Alexander changed the Roman world and kicked off a fifty-year period known as the Third Century Crisis, a time when twenty-six people claimed to be emperor. The role of emperor officially became a military position, and the city of Rome lost even more of its grip on political power in the empire which called itself Roman. During the two generations represented by Maesa and Mamaea, the whole empire changed. The Julias – Domna, Maesa, Soaemias and Mamaea – forced the Roman Empire to confront what it meant to be Roman, what it meant to be an emperor and even what it meant to be a man. The dominance of Maesa's family made Syria and Libya the most important Roman provinces and brought a whole new aristocracy to Rome, an aristocracy which demonstrated that Latin as a second language and non-European birth were no longer impediments to rule. This has been twisted by racists and proponents of an imaginary 'western civilisation' to be a negative, an 'orientalising', a feminising or a barbarian-ising of proper, European Romanness. But really, what Maesa, Mamaea and their family demonstrate is that Romanness comes in many shapes and sizes, and included Syrian women.

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† Every book I have read on this insists on 'translating' Domna's name to tell me what it 'means' in English and yet no one ever feels the need to 'translate' Cicero (chickpea) or Caesar (somehow related to hair). I am suspicious of people who want to denote some languages as having 'meaning' in names while others are allowed to remain neutral. The name Emma 'means' whole or universal allegedly but my parents named me Emma because my mum didn't like Emily, so they compromised. Ascribing deeper meaning to the names of Arabic peoples than to those of Latin peoples is some magical orientalist bullshit.

† *Fasces* were ceremonial bundles of sticks containing an axe which represented Roman government authority.

† You may sometimes see him called Heliogabalus, which was an attempt by Romans to westernise him.

LATE ANTIQUITY

Zenobia

268 CE

The Usurper Augusta

When Alexander Severus and Julia Mamaea were assassinated together in 235 CE, their deaths marked a sea change in the Roman Empire and the beginning of the longest-lasting crises since the civil wars of the Late Republic. The years of the four emperors (69 CE) and the five emperors (193 CE) aside, violence had remained contained within the imperial family. Maximinus Thrax, however, launched a fifty-year period of soft apocalypse for the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, sparking civil wars which roamed across and around the Mediterranean, Europe, West Asia and North Africa. For what feels like sheer one-upmanship, this period also included a Year of the Six Emperors (238 CE). That year also managed to top Julia Maesa's dynasty speedrunning record by including Gordian I, Gordian II and Gordian III, all three of whom died with horrible violence.†

While men were spending all their time killing themselves and one another and declaring a new person emperor every forty minutes like a rubbish Spartacus knock-off ('I'm emperor!' 'No, *I'm* emperor!' 'I'm emperor and so's my wife!'), the actual empire they were supposed to be ruling slowly fell apart. The Persian Sassanid Empire simply would not leave the eastern borders in Mesopotamia, Turkey and Syria alone, while the Alemmani and others perpetually harassed the northern borders in Germany, and Gaul and the Dacian border brought Rome into contact with the Goths and Huns. All the money was going to the army, causing terrible economic problems, a pandemic known as the Plague of Cyprian took more lives than the armies, and every so often one of the short-lived emperors would persecute some Christians just to keep everyone on their toes. Put all together like this, the period sounds like a catastrophe full of wailing and gnashing of teeth.[1] The multiple, simultaneous problems divided the attentions of emperors who were, mostly, soldiers rather than politicians and forced them to make hard choices about where to focus their attentions and dwindling resources. Some far-flung areas of the empire were neglected. Governors finished their terms and replacements never turned up; tax-collecting contractors gave up, meaning that armies and bureaucracies had less cash. Fewer people travelled to and from Rome, and Roman influence simply melted softly away, leaving a vacuum behind. Palmyra in Syria experienced this waning of imperial power, this withdrawal of attention and resources, and began gently to crumble as a Roman city. Their saviour, for a minute, was Queen Zenobia, spiritual heir of Julia Maesa, and the only woman to have tried to declare herself empress.

That's right, we're back in Syria. It might be a surprise to be spending so much time in an area so rarely associated with Rome these days, but Syria held a huge amount of power and importance in the empire and, as we shall see, could make or break it during times of crisis. Most importantly for now, Syria sat on the border of the third-century Roman Empire looking right into the Persian Sassanid Empire, making it valuable for both. Especially as Syria was home to three very important points on the trade routes between Europe and the rest of the world. Emesa and

Antioch we have already discussed. The third was Palmyra. And in about 240 CE, Palmyra was home to a woman who remains a central figure in Syrian nationalist identity, regardless of her unimpeachable Roman identity: Septimia Zenobia.[2]

Septimia Zenobia is a combination Latin and Greek name, demonstrating her Roman citizenship and the dominance of Hellenistic culture east of the Med. That's the name she put on coins when she declared herself Augusta, empress of the Roman Empire, in 268 CE. The name she put on inscriptions before that day, however, was the Aramaic name Bat-Zabbai (or Bathzabbi) and that's the name she probably used in her day-to-day life, as Palmyrene Aramaic was her first language and the first language of the city. If you look at inscriptions from Palmyra, you will see that most are bilingual in Aramaic and Greek and rarely contain Latin. Latin was the language of the empire in which Zenobia was born, lived and died. It was the language of tax, bureaucracy, the army and the imperial cult. Like Latin was the language of the Church, inaccessible to many laypeople, for centuries in Europe, Latin was a language of empire to Palmyrenes like Zenobia. But Latin does not a Roman make, and Zenobia was as Roman as anyone else in an empire which (despite its struggles) spanned at least thirty-eight modern UN-recognised countries.[†]

To be Roman required only one thing really: Roman citizenship. In 212 CE, Caracalla enacted a law, pretty much out of nowhere, known as the Antonine Constitution, instantly turning everyone living within the borders of the empire into a Roman citizen. Everyone suddenly held the benefits (and tax burdens) of citizenship of the city of Rome. Prior to this, Roman citizenship had been treated as a privilege, handed out by emperors as a reward and prized as a sign of power and prestige by those who had it. Caracalla ruined all that (and presumably upset a lot of people who had been very proud of their citizenship), but he also made everyone in the empire truly as Roman as a person from the actual city itself. However, Romanness also has other dimensions. From Perpetua, we know that Christians considered themselves in opposition to 'Romans' because they did not partake in Roman cultural and social practices, like feasts and games and religious worship. The Roman authorities, meanwhile, considered Christians to be traitorously and dangerously un-Roman because they would not join in with the imperial cult and sacrifice to the name of the emperor (assuming anyone could remember who was emperor on that day), despite holding citizenship. On the other hand, plenty of men served in the Roman army as auxiliaries and engaged in all the Roman religious goings on, and risked their lives fighting for Rome only to find that they were not granted citizenship at the end. The Roman machine considered them simply useful barbarians (called *foederati*), and they became a huge problem in the fourth century CE. Romanness, as all ethnic and cultural identities are, was complex and context dependent and included language, citizenship, religious practice and a desire to be Roman. In every aspect of her life, Zenobia presented herself as a Roman woman working within Roman systems and very much wanting Roman things. Like to be empress.

The sources for Zenobia's life and brief ownership of her own tiny empire are, to put it mildly, dodgy. The only source to offer a linear narrative is the *Historia Augusta*, which we have already noted is more trouble than it's sometimes worth. Occasionally, however, it has to be used and this is one of those times, so I will tell you that my approach to the *Historia Augusta* is largely the same as my approach to my beloved Sharpe novels. The Sharpe novels, in case you've missed out on their popcorn brilliance, are a series of historical novels by Bernard Cornwell following one Richard Sharpe (who is effectively an unkillable super soldier with whom all

women immediately fall in love) through his career as a British soldier in the Napoleonic Wars. They are delicious trash. Each one focuses on a different, very real, moment in the Napoleonic Wars and pops Sharpe and his band of ragtag heroes in as a vital but fictional element of the narrative. Because (outside of Sharpe) I find war interminably boring, everything that I know about, for example, the Battle of Waterloo comes from *Sharpe's Waterloo* (1990), a book in which the fictional Sharpe is responsible for the real injury sustained by the real Prince of Orange. Cornwell is quite scrupulous about research and accuracy and author's notes, so I know that I know *some* things about the battle and the whole Napoleon situation, but what I know is limited by the fact that I read it in a novel and I'm truly not sure how much is made up. The *Historia Augusta* offers the same level of confidence as a pulpy novel: it tells us some things about Zenobia and others, who the good guys and bad guys were and some beats about their stories, but its main aim was clearly to amuse and entertain rather than to teach accurate information. The rest of the sources for Zenobia's life lie somewhere between fragments and even smaller fragments, mostly dating from many centuries after Zenobia lived. When you are scraping through an obviously faked 'thirteenth Sibylline Oracle' and fifteen fragments of an anonymous tenth-century commentator on a half-missing palimpsest of a separate fragmentary history, you know you have source material problems.

What is amazing, however, is the sheer range and diversity of sources featuring Zenobia in some way. She appears in Latin novels, Byzantine histories (one, gloriously, is called *Extracts of Chronography*, proving that the ancients were much better at titling books than us), the Palestinian Talmud, Manichaean texts from medieval Iran, and Arabic legends. Although her reign as ruler of her own mini empire only lasted a few years, and she was Augusta for a matter of months, she left an incredible impact on multiple cultures. Plus there is all the material she herself produced, most importantly coins and mile markers. Mile markers don't sound like a thrilling piece of archaeology, but in the Roman east they were a very important method of communicating powers, titles and relationships between those in charge, so they are surprisingly exciting. All of these sources, however, are vague, confusing, contradictory and annoying. Piecing together a coherent narrative of Zenobia's life and reign is mostly saying 'we have no idea' a lot and making educated guesses. This makes for a pleasing amount of disagreement between scholars about her motivations and ambitions; every book and article forwards a wildly different version of Zenobia. Academics aren't the only people arguing about her; within modern Syria various competing narratives and groups have co-opted her name as a symbol of different nationalist agendas. A 1997 big-budget Syrian TV show about her life called *Al-Abadid* (*Anarchy*) was a huge hit. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the Hafez al-Assad regime put Zenobia on the 100 Syrian pound notes, and during the Syrian civil war when the Islamic State took Damascus, they paraded a bronze statue of Zenobia through the streets in victory as they destroyed the buildings and monuments of Ancient Palmyra.[3]

Many sources, both ancient and modern, deploy Zenobia as a warrior queen or a rebel against Roman rule. People like to depict her as a Syrian Boudicca fighting the evil imperial power of Rome, but she is actually far more interesting and complicated than that, and she exemplifies in a unique way the inescapability of Roman power and the powerful loyalty that people throughout the Roman world felt to it. Because while Zenobia undoubtedly, briefly, rebelled against an emperor, she did so not to throw off the shackles of the Roman Empire but to take them in her own hand. For all the attempts to paint Zenobia as Syrian, where Syrian means

un-Roman or foreign, it's clear even in Latin sources that she saw herself as undeniably Roman and very carefully negotiated her self-presentation and activities to align herself with Roman power at (almost) every stage of her short career.

Let's begin. The least shocking news I can give you is that we know absolutely nothing about Zenobia's early life, and all dates prior to her appearing as queen are basically guesswork. In brief, we think she was born around 240 CE, but her parents are completely unknown. She describes herself as Zenobia, daughter of Antiochus at one point. This might mean her dad was called Antiochus or it might not. Some think it might be an attempt to link herself to Julia Balbilla's Seleucids, or it might be her dad's actual name and we are overthinking.[4] Somewhere around 258 CE, she married a guy called Odaenathus (also called Odainath in Aramaic) and had some children. The sources are so wild on Zenobia that she could have had anywhere between one and seven children. She herself refers to only one child, so we are going with just that one because any others don't matter anyway. Her one child was a son called Vaballathus in Greek and Latin (Wahballath in Aramaic).

Odaenathus was significantly older than Zenobia and had at least one adult son from a previous marriage, who may well have been Zenobia's age because elites are like that. And Odaenathus was *elite.* His position in Palmyra, which acted as a Greek city state slightly outside of Roman control, is difficult to describe. He was effectively the leading man of Palmyra, both its mayor and its military leader and its richest guy and the most prestigious. He held a unique status because an emperor (either Philip the Arab or Gordian III) had granted him Senatorial status as a reward for something without him ever having to actually be a Senator or sit in the Senate or go to Rome. When Caracalla made every free person a citizen, he deprived emperors of a useful gold star for good behaviour among the provincials. So they improvised and started giving out Senatorial status as gold stars instead. A brilliant manoeuvre, but it did rather erode the prestige of actually being a Senator. Senatorial status didn't bestow any actual power, it merely allowed Odaenathus to wear a fancier toga and call himself *vir clarissimus* (most noble man) in inscriptions and things, as he happily did.[5] At about the same time that he married Zenobia, the pair were given a promotion to consular rank as another reward for fighting the Persians on behalf of the Roman army, meaning a spectacularly fancy toga.[6] He also described himself as exarch and *rš'*, Greek and Aramaic terms for rulers.[7] None of these were official titles with official powers or responsibilities; he simply gave them to himself to denote his pre-eminence within his city, much as Augustus had called himself Augustus.

Such was life for Zenobia as the wife of the big man in town for a couple of years. In 260 CE, however, things changed quite dramatically. As we noted in the previous chapter, the Persian Empire grew as a real and violent threat from the 230s CE. Trajan had conquered a huge area of Mesopotamia in 117 CE and made it part of the Roman Empire. In the 230s, the Persians started actively taking back territory, razing Roman cities and killing Roman citizens, which Romans did not like at all. Dealing with them, however, had not yet been a priority because both the Rhine and Danube borders were threatened by significantly more frightening enemies who had taken up most of the attention of the many, many emperors. In 260 CE, the emperor Valerian thought he had hit on a winning strategy by co-ruling the empire with his son Gallienus. With two emperors, he could split imperial attention and fight on two fronts at once, so he left Gallienus in the west and marched straight into Persia to show Shapur I who was the real boss of this town. Turned out the boss was Shapur I, because Valerian – in a move so humiliating, it's amazing the Romans ever dealt with it – got himself captured by Shapur who kept him in the

court as his pet Roman emperor.[8] His capture also took out all his officers and most of his army, leaving a power vacuum in the entire Roman east, into which stepped Odaenathus and Zenobia.

Odaenathus basically stepped up, took control of the armies and governance of the province plus the remainder of Valerian's forces and started resolving problems with impressive effectiveness. A guy from Emesa attempted to do the same thing but in a treasonous way by calling his sons emperors (Augusti) so Odaenathus put him down like a Roman Jason Statham and then went marching after Shapur I. He was so successful, he marched all the way to Ctesiphon (near Baghdad), restored the entire province of Mesopotamia to Roman control and then marched home again, whereupon he sent all his prisoners and booty to Gallienus, allowing Gallienus to hold a Triumph taking credit for Odaenathus's success. Such was the incredible loyalty of Odaenathus to Roman power that he did not even attempt to name himself emperor, although he absolutely could have. Every idiot was doing it. Instead, he used his success to bolster the reputation of the reigning emperor, who had just managed to lose control of the most Roman of Roman provinces in the west.[†] I suspect, therefore, that Gallienus felt enormous gratitude to Odaenathus's willing loyalty and boost to his reign.

Naturally, Odaenathus did reward himself and his family. He gave himself the Persian title King of Kings, as a direct snub to Shapur I, and Zenobia became his queen. The pair, along with Odaenathus's oldest son Herodian, happily ruled all the territory they had taken as king and queen, with the blessing of the Roman emperor.[9] The power split is obscure and fascinating. Odaenathus went out of his way to not take any Roman titles or threaten Roman power, although he was effectively an autonomous ruler of a kingdom reaching from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. He appears to have considered himself a subordinate helper to Gallienus, a pseudo-governor keeping the foreigners in line for the glory of Rome itself while the emperor was busy, rather than a client king.[10] Posthumously, Odaenathus was described as '*mtqnn'* of all the East', a title which has confused and distressed historians for many decades. It's implied that this is a Latin title, because the east is only the east when it is looked at from the west, but the translation of *mtqnn'* is unclear. It could be that Gallienus named Odaenathus '*restitutor totius orientis*', 'restorer of the east', an honorific like being given an MBE. Very lovely, but simply recognition of a job well done. Alternatively, *mtqnn'* could mean *corrector* – reformer of the east. This is a job title, describing a job that carried the power to command the Roman army. That would mean he was made a member of Gallienus's staff and is very different.[11] Naturally, we have no clue which was meant and you can take your pick. If it's honorary, then Odaenathus was a highly prized client king, slightly outside of Roman oversight. If its official, then Odaenathus was a highly prized Roman official. Either way, he carefully constructed a powerful role for himself without ever threatening the empire or detracting from the emperor. He carved his own path, and deliberately contributed to Gallienus's limited prestige instead.

It seemed that Odaenathus's reign or leadership was going well right up until the moment that someone assassinated him and Herodian. Every single source describing this assassination offers a different killer with a different motivation, leading me to suspect that every single one of them is imagining things. The potential narratives include that he was killed by his cousin during an argument because Odaenathus took away the cousin's horse (LOL), that a conspiracy of his own men did it, that Zenobia was involved because she was jealous of her stepson, that an entirely random man did it, and that Gallienus sent assassins to kill him.[12]

The most recent book on Zenobia by Nathanael Andrade takes the last of these the most seriously, and argues that Gallienus got fed up of Odaenathus acting too autonomously, so had him assassinated.[13] I find this terribly rude after Odaenathus let him have a Triumph so I'm unconvinced, personally, but if whoever did kill him did so in an attempt to end the little fiefdom he had going within the empire they entirely failed to reckon with his wife.

Finally – finally – Zenobia emerges from the shadow of her husband in the way that most queens do: she declared her ten-year-old son the successor of Odaenathus's titles and powers and herself his regent. This sounds uneventful perhaps, until we remember that Odaenathus had created his strange and symbolic position as a King of Kings within the Roman Empire and none of his official, Roman titles or powers were in any way hereditary.[14] Consuls' sons did not inherit consulships, generals' sons did not inherit military power. In the Roman system, the death of Odaenathus technically meant that control of the armies, mints, tax office and many tentacles of imperial bureaucracy reverted back to Gallienus or to the Roman governors of the two provinces Odaenathus had been leading. Zenobia, however, had a different interpretation of what she had been living through for the past few years. She believed that her family now ruled a semi-autonomous client kingdom. In this kingdom, she had been hailed as a queen, her husband as king of kings. Divine honours were paid to him as they were paid to the living and dead emperors from the west.[15] Perhaps not realising how very radical she was being in this moment, she saw no reason to give up her position and her way of life just because her husband died, so she simply didn't. She transferred all Odaenathus's titles to Vaballathus and all his powers to herself. She made a monarchy within the borders of the empire, and apparently had absolutely no trouble doing so.[16]

A milestone from Palmyra dated about 268 CE shows how swiftly and heartily Zenobia emphasised both her son's inheritance of his father's jobs and her own preeminent position within 'his' reign. It reads, in Palmyrene Aramaic,

> For the life and [victory] of Septimius Vaballathus Athenodo[rus], the most illustrious King of Kings and *mtqnn'* of the entire Orient, son of Septimius [Odainath, King] of Kings; and for the life of Septimia Bathzabbai, the most illustrious queen, mother of the King of Kings, daughter of Antiochus. Fourteen miles.[17]

A lot to read just to learn you are fourteen miles away from Palmyra, but useful for us. And for any traveller who might want to know who to talk to if they have a problem they need fixing, if their neighbour is stealing from them or they need a tax break. In this area, they don't go to the Roman authorities, who are seemingly completely absent; they go to Zenobia and her kid.

In this way, Zenobia quietly and quickly undermined the reach of Roman bureaucracy and power in Syria and Mesopotamia. She also appears to have cultivated a real court around herself, both in terms of having loyal sidekicks and in terms of attracting intellectuals and delegations to see her. Stories about her court come from a lot of very scattered and diverse sources, so I like them more. Her three most loyal courtiers were Septimius Zabdas, her general, Septimius Zabbai, called the leader of Tadmor where Tadmor is another name for Palmyra, and an Athenian philosopher and sophist called Cassius Longinus.[18] Zenobia went out of her way to invite Longinus into her court to be a tutor for Vaballathus because he had an empire-wide reputation as a 'living library and a walking museum'.[19] He also seems to have been a sounding board and adviser to Zenobia.

With these men, Zenobia received delegations as the leader of the Roman east in Syria and Mesopotamia. She appears in Iranian sources as Tadi, the 'wife of Caesar' living in Tadmor and receiving a Manichaean preacher called Abba.† We also see Zenobia in the Palestinian Talmud overseeing the trial of a Jew and, after making some jokes about monotheism, pardoning him for whatever his crime was.[20] To complete the monotheistic triangle of the third century, she also took a side in a Christian dispute in Antioch when a synod declared that one of their bishops, Paul of Samosata, was a heretic and tried to expel him from the city. Paul, apparently, upset everyone in the area by claiming that Christ was fully human (denying the official Church doctrine of his dual human and divine nature), living with women and – worst of all – writing new psalms. Once again, we learn that we absolutely cannot trust poets. He wrote to Zenobia for help and she gave her support. Her support had limited value within the synod and he was expelled as a heretic, but she showed her personal engagement with all the conflicts in her kingdom.[21] It also shows how peacefully and openly Christianity flourished in the Roman Empire when no one was paying explicit attention to it.

But Gallienus did not have time to deal with Zenobia's testing of the limits of imperial power in 268 CE because he was too busy being murdered by his own men. Poor old Gallienus. He has an unusually sad and pensive look in some of his busts, like even as he was sitting for them he knew this wasn't going to pan out well. Gallienus was replaced by Claudius II, known as Claudius Gothicus, basically because he got to Italy before anyone else. The only thing you need to know about Claudius II is that the *Historia Augusta* claims that he often – *often* – punched horses so hard their teeth fell out.[22] Rarely am I glad to not be able to believe a word the *Historia Augusta* says but this is one of the times. Anyway. Killing and replacing an emperor takes time, and then Claudius II got completely caught up in fighting Goths in Serbia and Alemmani in Italy, which was a lot to be getting on with. There is a hint that Claudius II was fully aware of Zenobia and the kind of things she might have been doing in Mesopotamia between 268 and 270 CE in the fact that Claudius II took the title Parthicus Maximus in 269 CE. Roman emperors took placenames as epithets to celebrate a victory over that place. This tradition began during the Republic; for example, P. Cornelius Scipio was given the name 'Africanus' following his defeat of Hannibal at Zama in 202 BCE and his brother L. Cornelius Scipio demanded the epithet 'Asiaticus' following his victory at Magnesia in 190 BCE. Such epithets demonstrated that the general was the conqueror of the place in question and emperors were happy to continue the tradition by taking credit for any conquering done by any general during their reign. Tiberius's adopted son was the last non-emperor to be granted a conquering epithet as a reward for his efforts avenging three legions slaughtered in the Teutoburg Forest and it defined him so successfully that we are not entirely sure what Germanicus's birth name was. All we know is that he conquered (a bit of) Germany. No emperor made that mistake again. Thus, Claudius took Britannicus as an epithet following the invasion of Britain, and Trajan named himself Dacicus, Germanicus and Parthicus for successes in Germany, Dacia and, you guessed it, Parthia. For Claudius II to suddenly be calling himself Parthicus Maximus, then, suggests that he had celebrated a massive victory there, a victory to rival the deified Trajan's. And the only person doing any fighting near the Parthians in 269 CE was Zenobia. At about the same time, she added the title Persicus Maximus to Vaballathus's epithets.[23] Additionally, Zenobia is credited with seriously upgrading a couple of fortresses on the banks of the Euphrates in Iran at about the same time, in the exact place one might be fighting Parthians, one of which came to be named

after her.[24] These are scraps of evidence of some-thing, probably a war in which many people lost their loves, grieved and wept and lay awake in terror but which has vanished from the historical record. What precisely that something might be depends on how you feel about Zenobia. Looking at the two most recent books, Pat Southern interprets these scraps as evidence that Zenobia took some successful action against the Persians or defended Mesopotamia successfully, allowing everyone to feel good about themselves.[25] In this interpretation, Claudius II and Zenobia share an effective co-operative relationship and Syria is still Roman territory, perhaps a client kingdom. Nathanael Andrade, on the other hand, interprets Claudius II calling himself Parthicus Maximus as an unprompted act of aggression on Claudius's part, a warning shot fired across Zenobia's bow that he saw her and was coming for her.[26] In this interpretation, the east is no longer Roman but the separate Palmyrene Empire.

We might have found out more beyond endless speculation had Claudius II not been struck by the hand of fate and suddenly died of plague in 270 CE. Usually, when an emperor died someone was waiting to take his place immediately (often they were holding the knife), but Claudius's death genuinely took the empire by surprise. What amazed everyone even more was that the Senate in Rome suddenly grew a spine and crowned Claudius's brother emperor before any of the generals could announce themselves. The armies did not like this one tiny bit. *They* picked emperors, not the stuffed togas in Rome. So the Danube legions fired back with the announcement that their guy, Aurelian, was emperor and fuck the Senate. The internal conflict added a whole new dimension of stress for the empire and Zenobia took full advantage of the distraction. She took over another province.

Very quickly, and with minimal fuss, Zenobia raised an army of 70,000 Syrians and, to quote someone who is not me, 'barbarians' and attacked the neighbouring province of Roman Arabia.[27] Specifically, she attacked the capital city of Bostra where the Legio III Cyrenaica was based and absolutely smashed them and their temple. Whether the legion was actually there is not entirely clear, but there is a snippy inscription on their Temple of Jupiter Hammon which noted that the temple had to be rebuilt and reinforced after Palmyrene enemies destroyed it. Zenobia and her general Zabdas led their army through Arabia with minimal resistance and minimal damage and took full control of it within a matter of months, raising some questions about what in god's name she thought she was doing.

Until this point, Zenobia's strategy looked a lot like her husband's: she presented herself as a subordinate and with no claim to any Roman powers. She called herself a queen (*basilia*) and a woman of Senatorial status, but nothing that could really annoy a Roman emperor or look like usurpation of his legal powers. Although she established a court and was doing things like building fortresses, she acted in the name of Rome and fulfilling her obligations as an outpost or client kingdom of the Roman Empire. She never, for example, stopped the mint at Antioch from pumping out the coins of Gallienus and Claudius II with all their propaganda. She didn't interfere with Roman taxes or armies or officials; she simply fulfilled the obligations of the Roman state to their subjects; obligations the *actual* Roman state was currently failing to fulfil. She protected them and they called her queen. Raising a rival army, attacking a Roman provincial capital, fighting Roman soldiers and burning temples of Rome's number one god represented quite the change of pace.

Again, theories abound about Zenobia's motivations. In the ancient sources, she is mostly presented as overly ambitious and with an insatiable lust for power; a very common trope for women, even ones who rule well, as everyone agrees

Zenobia did. In fact, apart from one section of the *Historia Augusta*, the ancient sources are unified in their agreement that Zenobia was an extremely good ruler, with the courage and brains of a man. This is the best kind of compliment one can expect from an ancient source, depressingly. No one maligns her as cruel, self-indulgent, arrogant, grasping, overly masculine in her clothing or lifestyle or easily led, as one might expect from years of slogging through ancient men writing about women. In fact, the *Historia Augusta* (which is, remember, probably a novel) repeatedly describes her as not only an ideal leader, mixing clemency with strictness in just the right measure, but also as extraordinarily beautiful: 'being, indeed, the noblest of all the women of the east, and, as Cornelius Capitolinus declares, the most beautiful … Her face was dark … her eyes were black and powerful beyond the usual wont, her spirit divinely great, and her beauty incredible. So white were her teeth that many thought that she had pearls in place of teeth.'[28]

The *Historia Augusta* is the only source which attempts to sketch out a personality for Zenobia and it does so with the explicit purpose of making Gallienus look bad (because women took power under his reign) and Aurelian look good (because she was a great woman, but he still defeated her). And it's also a novel. But the other portraits in the *Historia Augusta* generally line up with popular opinion. Emperors hated by the *Historia Augusta*, like Elagabalus, were often much loathed by other sources or subject to *damnatio memoriae*,[†] while those it likes, such as Aurelian, were regularly deified so we can perhaps take the portrait of Zenobia as being generally representative of how she was viewed by casual readers even if the specifics are not perfectly true.

The specifics are quietly hilarious, though. The section dedicated to Odaenathus and Zenobia are gushing in the extreme. After outlining her perfection as a queen and a military leader and relating her to Cleopatra and claiming she regularly marched three to four miles with her army, it then claims that she was so chaste that she only ever had sex for the sake of getting pregnant with her husband: 'she would refrain until the time of menstruation to see if she were pregnant; if not, she would again grant him an opportunity of begetting children'. Truly a wild way to compliment someone![29] In the *Life of Aurelian*, where Aurelian is the hero, the *Historia Augusta* compliments Zenobia far less and implies that her association with Cleopatra (invented wholesale by the *Historia Augusta*) is a sign of arrogance and eastern rebelliousness. Meanwhile her being a woman suddenly becomes a damning flaw, making her inherently silly and cowardly, rather undermining all the previous praise but no one ever accused the *Historia Augusta* of being consistent, and Roman misogyny ran incredibly deep.

Zenobia's attack on Arabia cannot be seen as anything other than an act of aggression against the Roman powers that still worked east of the Mediterranean and which had been largely untouched by the Persian threat. This alone would have raised eyebrows on the other side of the sea, but she kept pushing her luck. Her real goal was not Arabia but Egypt. She and her 70,000 men blasted their way to Alexandria, both the administrative capital of Egypt and the most important port in the entire empire, and snatched it with astonishing ease. By December 270 CE, Zenobia controlled four Roman provinces and had the power to cut off supplies to large chunks of the rest of the empire, including Rome, if she wanted to. Alexandria was such an important part of the workings of the empire that the emperor himself personally controlled access to it. Augustus had annexed Egypt and set up a system whereby it was ruled not by a Senatorial or consular governor, but by an Equestrian prefect answerable only to the emperor because anyone with nefarious intentions or

personal ambitions could starve Rome to death by closing the Egyptian port. So Zenobia turning up there of all places with an army of Palmyrenes, removing the Roman army from the garrison and leaving her own controlling force of five thousand men was alarming to the new emperor Aurelian, to say the least.

Zenobia does not seem to have viewed her taking of Arabia and Egypt as an attack on the empire from the outside *per se* but as an exertion of power from within. She perceived herself as performing an internal usurpation, along the same lines as Aurelian's declaration of himself as emperor in opposition to Claudius II's brother from the Pannonian barracks, or all of Aurelian's predecessors for the past forty years. She saw herself as placing her son, Vaballathus, on the Roman throne but, oddly, without replacing Aurelian. This is possibly where Zenobia had a unique idea about her place within the Roman Empire. The vast majority of attempted uprisings and usurpations around the empire aimed to take full and sole control of the whole empire as an emperor, denoted by the term Augustus, using Roman legions paid with Roman taxes. An exception was the Gallic Empire led by Postumus. This mini empire consisted of the Roman provinces of Gaul, Germania, Britannia and (briefly) Hispania. It had broken away and started its own thing (with blackjack and hookers) in 260 CE, rejecting the wider Roman Empire entirely. Zenobia, however, rocked up in Egypt and told everyone that Vaballathus was Aurelian's subordinate co-emperor. From December 270 CE, Egyptian bureaucratic papyri started being dated using the regnal date of Aurelian and his brand new co-emperor Vaballathus, which was a surprise to Aurelian (and Vaballathus). The documents describe Vaballathus as 'the most illustrious man, consul, king, Imperator and leader of the Romans' (*dux Romanorum*).[30] These terms, apart from king, are highly Roman but scrupulously keep Vaballathus in a subordinate position to the emperor, the Augustus. The same words appear on milestones in Egypt and Arabia and are echoed by coins produced under Zenobia's direction by the mints in Alexandria and Antioch. On these coins, Aurelian is shown wearing the radiant crown that had become a common symbol for imperial power, and Vaballathus appears on the other side wearing the laurel crown, suggesting he is a junior partner in imperial power. The coins minted in Antioch hint at a little rebellion, however, because they all put Vaballathus on the front and Aurelian on the reverse (denoted by the mint mark).[31]

The taking of Egypt could not be ignored by anyone who considered themselves to be a Roman emperor. It would have attracted negative attention from even the most passive milquetoast ruler, and Aurelian was the exact opposite of that. I have often seen, to my great delight, the (highly recommended) Rough Roman Memes subreddit describe Aurelian as a gigachad because of his unstoppable energy and massive success in reunifying the empire.[32] Aurelian definitely had Zenobia on his to-do list before she took Alexandria, but that action made him pivot at lightning speed. Even though Zenobia had appointed a Roman governor (having defeated and killed the previous one), had taken no action to interfere with the ports and was acting exactly as though Egypt was still very much a part of the empire and Aurelian was emperor, Aurelian fully abandoned the overrun province of Dacia to the Goths so that he could leg it to the east as fast as he could.

Zenobia, on hearing that Aurelian did not actually want or need a twelve-year-old junior emperor with a pushy stage mum that he'd never met, had two options: she could back down, or she could double down. Can you guess which one she chose? Well, we'd not be reading about her if she backed down, would we? When Aurelian started barrelling across Turkey towards her with several battle-hardened

legions at his back, Zenobia suddenly learned that she was an enemy of Rome and Roman power, so she decided to go full, balls to the wall, outright usurper. She held a ceremony in Alexandria where Vaballathus was crowned Augustus and she crowned herself Augusta. She announced that they were a rightful imperial power, not Aurelian, and that she would fight to rule the empire alone. She started pumping out coins with Vaballathus on the obverse calling him Victorious Augustus, Eternal Augustus, Just Augustus. She put Vaballathus on one side and Jupiter the Sustainer (Jupiter Statoris) on the other. She printed coins with herself on the obverse alongside Juno Regina, Juno the Queen.[33] These are gods explicitly associated with the city of Rome and Roman power. She made a significant bid for full imperial power as though she herself were a general. Sensibly, while she was making these very bold propaganda statements calling herself empress, she also made a tactical physical retreat. She pulled her troops out of Egypt and Arabia and prepared for battle with Aurelian in Antioch, hoping to take him down.

There's no way that Zenobia could have known that Aurelian was a gigachad, an emperor who contained the ability to lead the Roman army through wars and keep them happy and win the love and gratitude of the populations he encountered by not slaughtering them, and a great tactical general. She presumably thought he was another wet western Roman who would crumble at the first sight of trouble as so many of his predecessors had. (Valerian, incidentally, was probably still alive at this point literally being used as a footstool by Shapur I and his family.)[34] Pulling back out of Egypt was potentially a conciliatory move, a 'hey let's be friends and I'll stay in my lane'. Aurelian wasn't much of one for friends, however, and especially not ones calling themselves Augusta. So, he crushed the Palmyrene army. As I mentioned earlier, battles make me want to tear my eyes out in boredom unless they are written by Bernard Cornwell so you won't get any play-by-plays here.† You just need to know that it took three battles for Aurelian to finally defeat Zenobia's army and he allegedly caught her only because the Roman army found her trying to flee the blockade of Palmyra on a camel, possibly to carry on the fight.[35] She was captured in 272 CE, with her bid for imperial power having lasted about sixteen months.

One of Aurelian's main virtues as a barracks emperor was his clemency. Throughout his many, many wars to reunify the empire he repeatedly forgave transgressions and refused to sack any cities he besieged. When he eventually overthrew the Gallic Empire, he not only kept the Gallic emperor Tetricus alive, he gave him a job. Zenobia, being a woman, didn't get quite that treatment. She was tried in Emesa and, according to early Byzantine historian Zosimus, she tried an all-time classic defence technique: she cried and said men made her do it. Batted her eyelashes and claimed she was just a silly little woman who could never possibly lead an army against such a big strong emperor. The big boys made me do it, she said. It worked.[36] Her general Zabdas disappeared and Longinus, the sophist, was executed. Zenobia only had to suffer some ritual humiliation and lifelong exile from her beloved Palmyra. She was taken to Rome and paraded through the streets in Triumph as Aurelian's prisoner, but then she was given a house in the city and some kind of allowance and was permitted to live freely as a private citizen. Vaballathus is such a non-entity in this story that it is unknown what happened to him, but a couple of fourth-century Christian sources refer to people living in Rome who descended from Zenobia, so maybe he survived.[37] When Zenobia was stopped and captured in 272 CE she was only thirty-two years old. She had a whole life left to live on the banks of the Tiber.

Zenobia's public life was short but special, and highlights how chaotic but full of possibilities the period of the Third Century Crisis felt to those who lived it. The apparently inescapable structures of the empire and hegemonic Roman norms suddenly melted away, allowing men and women to imagine new ways of being part of the Roman Empire. Zenobia, possibly with one eye on Julia Maesa as a model, imagined that she, a Palmyrene woman with a pre-teen son, could rule the empire. She could imagine herself as an imperial power, just as the hundreds of men who made a bid for the throne could, and she could imagine an imperial power existing without the help of the official Roman army. In retrospect, her behaviour looks like insanity, but in the context of a weakened western empire and an ascendent east, it looks like bravery, creativity and nerve.

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† In fairness, Gordian III's reign lasted until 244 CE but then he died in battle.

† Algeria, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Morocco, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Palestine, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, UK, Vatican City.

† In 260 CE, just as Valerian was being captured, Marcus Cassianius Latinius Postumus, governor of Germania, declared that he was no longer loyal to Gallienus and that he didn't want to be Roman emperor. Instead, he took control of Germania, Gaul, Britannia and Hispania and made himself a splinter territory ruled independently and in opposition to the Roman Empire. This is known as the Gallic Empire. Gallienus thus managed to lose both his dad and Gaul in the same year.

† Manichaeism was, in the third century, a brand-new offshoot of Gnosticism from the Persian Empire led by the Prophet Mani which swept up followers as quickly as Christianity did but was more successfully stamped out by the Romans in the fourth century. Andrade, 2018: 187–8.

† *Damnatio memoriae* was a formal process by which a person's name was removed from the public record, including being filed off inscriptions and coins and their statues destroyed.

† I recommend Watson, 1999: 70–88 for details if you like that kind of thing.

Melania the Elder

373 CE

The Saint

The last time we were in Rome, Elagabalus was scandalising Roman Senators with dresses and raping Vestal Virgins and the Praetorian Guard controlled the fate of the empire from their camp right outside the Colline Gate. That gate, Romans believed, had been built by Servius Tullius, the king said to have been fathered by a god and crowned by Tanaquil. When Melania the Younger first came to Rome, aged twenty-one, the Colline Gate was almost a thousand years old and no longer marked the extent of the city.[1] It was a remnant of a bygone time when Rome was the administrative and emotional centre of an empire spanning several million square miles. Over the centuries, through the Third Century Crisis and the rise of the barracks emperor, the meaning of Rome as a city diffused considerably, as entire dynasties rose and fell (often within weeks) without anyone ever setting foot in Italy. In 293 CE, the emperor Diocletian came up with a solution to the problem of split imperial attention which had allowed people like Zenobia to cause trouble behind the imperial back by formally splitting the empire in half down the middle of the Mediterranean and appointing to each half a senior emperor (Augustus) and a junior emperor (Caesar). He called this the Tetrarchy and then, delighted with his work, he retired to grow cabbages in Croatia.

As part of splitting the empire officially, Diocletian designated four cities as regional capitals. In the east, he picked Nicomedia and Smirmium (Izmir, Turkey and Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia). In the west, the Augustus would be based in Mediolanum, while the Caesar's court was settled in Augusta Treverorum. These are now Milan, Italy and Trier, Germany. Notably, none of these capitals is Rome. Rome Diocletian kept as a nominal capital, with its own Urban Prefect (a kind of mayor) and special privileges and the Senate still very much existing and growing, but without any of the actual imperial power going anywhere near it. The result of this, oddly, was that Roman aristocracy returned to a much quieter and less viciously politically competitive version of the old Republic.

The other enormous change occurring at the very start of the fourth century, almost exactly 100 years after the martyrdom of Perpetua, was the legalisation of Christianity. Following centuries of sporadic but horrific persecution, sometimes on an epic scale, Christianity had been legalised by the man who smashed the Tetrarchy: Constantine the Great. You'll have noticed that Izmir is not a hugely famous city despite being Diocletian's capital and that's because Diocletian's vision for the empire lasted precisely as long as Diocletian. He never realised that what he'd done was quadruple the number of positions that Roman generals could now fight for and thus quadrupled the number of high-profile murder victims in the empire. Constantine I declared himself emperor in 306 CE and spent two full decades punching other Roman emperors in the face until he was the last man standing in 324 CE. Then he founded Constantinople, legalised Christianity and let his mum go on missions to find the True Cross.

He also called the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE in order to force Christians to come to an official conclusion about the nature of the Trinity and the nature of Christ. I find this fascinating but I appreciate that others are less thrilled by debates within arcane monotheistic theology so I will just leave you with the knowledge that two of the main players at this council were Arius on one side and Nicholas of Myra who opposed him. At one point the arguing became so intense and heated that Nicholas punched Arius full in the face and had to be dragged away. This is fun enough by itself because bishops fighting is funny, but it's even more hilarious when you realise that Nicholas of Myra is now better known to us as the alleged historical basis for Santa Claus.† Anyway, the outcome of the Council was the Nicene Creed and the establishment of a Church orthodoxy along with a real, imperially approved, Church hierarchy of bishops and beliefs.‡ You just need to know that orthodox Christianity is Nicene and believes in the Trinity, while Arian Christianity becomes a heresy because it rejects the Trinity.

How Christianity transformed from being a religion that Roman emperors were attempting to massacre out of people to the dominant religion of the Roman powers that be in about 150 years is a story for another book, but it happened and it killed the Christian cottage industry in producing martyrs to fight the war against the devil. Legal Christianity thoroughly undermined a good couple of centuries' worth of theologians claiming that martyrdom was the best, if not only, path to salvation. Briefly on the back foot, in the fourth century they managed to gather their resources and instead focus in on new forms of spiritual martyrdom. Somehow (as they had got *quite* deep into hating bodies by this point) spiritual martyrdom still managed to make the body and the Christian suffer horribly through asceticism, including forced virginity and monasticism. Here were whole new ways for women to engage with the very extreme end of Christianity and, once again, transcend the 'innate weakness' of being female.

Melania the Elder became a saint as a result of her enormous devotion to asceticism and monasticism, but she lived a whole life before she ever set foot in a monastery. When she arrived in Rome in 363 CE, she was coming from her home in Spain as a twenty-one-year-old widow and mother of three children, two of whom had already died. Her only surviving son, Valerius Publicola, survived to travel with her. Through her father's line, she was a member of the Antonii family, making Mark Antony a very distant ancestor and meaning that her paternal family could, if they wanted, claim descent from Hercules. On both sides, her grandfathers had been consuls and she married Valerius Maximus, scion of another very ancient Patrician family, who had been Urban Prefect in 361 CE and may have been a favourite of controversial emperor Julian (known as Julian the Apostate).[2] Both the ancient biographies of Melania skip over her years as a wife, a pregnant woman, a grieving mother, a young widow and her life as a Roman Christian matron. Her biographers were Christian men and those were not Christian things in their mind. But Melania spent ten years in Rome balancing her Christianity and her duty to her family, demonstrating that, by the fourth century, the integration of family and Christianity had become possible.

Two types of sources survive for Late Antiquity: Christian texts and imperial histories. Both are apocalyptic in tone. The imperial histories such as Ammianus Marcellinus's *Res Gestae*, Procopius's *History of the Wars*, or Jordanes' *Getica* describe a relentless, grinding series of battles, backstabs, murders, invasion, attacks, losses and assorted horrors, leaving the reader feeling mildly traumatised. Plus, because they follow the various emperors and sub-emperors around, they very rarely arrive in Rome, hanging around instead on the frontiers in the Balkans, in

West Asia and in Constantinople. These histories give the impression of an empire seething and churning, an active warzone in every moment.

On the other side of the coin are the Christian sources, including a huge number of letters, Christian histories, hagiographies and furious treatises against one another because no one hates Christians like Christians hate one another. These texts, pretty much without exception, have a baseline tone of hysteria that starts at eleven and focus exclusively on wild extremes of fundamentalist Christian behaviour. Because Christianity is and has always been primarily interested in the salvation of every single individual soul (and arguing about what that salvation requires), every event from reading the wrong book to wearing rags with insufficient humility is treated as though a comet had just smashed into the building, while every Christian victory (a woman becoming a consecrated virgin, for example) is presented as being representative of a mass collapse of 'pagan' society. The little lives of normal Christians going to church and worrying about their children's education, the silent majority if you will, do not interest Christian theologians very much at all. The combined effect of all these sources is, as I say, apocalyptic. The barbarians are at the gate, the empire crumbles, the Senate are fleeing, and the whole place is on fire. The end is nigh!

If one picks at the sources just a little, though, particularly the Christian ones as they are my favourites, it is possible to see underneath them a life that continued in Rome in the most ancient way. And, for a decade, it did for Melania. When she arrived in Rome, she immediately put her young son on the list to be Urban Praetor, a kind of head judge for the city. Publicola was Urban Praetor in 373 CE and Urban Praetors were announced ten years in advance of their taking office. So Publicola (I'm trying to be serious about his name because it's pronounced Publi-CO-la but also Publicola the word looks like an Urban Dictionary entry for a nefarious act with a Diet Coke can) – Publicola was announced as the Urban Praetor for 373 CE in 363 CE, mere months after arriving in Rome and aged somewhere between two and seven years old.[3] Urban Praetors were announced a decade in advance because their primary job during their tenure was to personally finance and run some public games in Rome, including chariot races, gladiator fights, beast hunts and spectacular executions, and they often needed time to save up to put on the kind of show Romans still expected. A century later, a source would recount with awe that praetors spent thousands of pounds of gold on their games in celebrations that could last up to seven days.[4] Exactly as praetors had been doing for the past thousand years, Roman praetors still had to source a tiger and plan a theatre production and find some way to impress the crowds in the Eternal City so their name would be remembered, and that's what Publicola and Melania did. In Rome, in the late fourth century, as they had every year for hundreds of years, the inhabitants of Rome both rich and poor sat in a Roman arena and cheered for their Urban Praetor.

The year 373 CE was the year that Melania's life really started as far as her biographers, Palladius and Paulinus, were concerned. In this year Melania saw her son enter his public career, then piled all her movable property – her silks and her jewels and her carved furniture and silver platters and delicate glass bottles full of perfumes – onto a flotilla of ships, announced that she was quitting the material world and sailed to Alexandria to live the life of a Christian ascetic.[5] Having set her son up with an appropriate Christian guardian and an appropriate secular position to ensure his worldly success and the future of her family name, she decided she was not interested in the life of a Roman matron, going to church and also going to the games, sitting through yet another interminable dinner with four women called

Julia passive-aggressively comparing earrings. She wanted more.

For as long as Rome had existed, few other options had been available for women (and men) who found the urban social and political scene boring or stifling or unfulfilling. One simply had to have affairs or drink too much, while doing one's duty to the family and the city and the gods and the emperor – who all had remarkably similar priorities – until one died. Christianity, however, offered aristocratic women something brand new; it offered a whole new way to be dutiful, virtuous and praiseworthy that was also adventurous, independent and fun. A Roman woman with the means and will could now walk away from her house full of ancient obligations, sail to Africa and Palestine and Jerusalem and Asia and walk her own path; they could focus on their own personal salvation and their own soul over the demands of their families, and they could do monstrous things to their bodies and be praised for it.[6] And this is what Melania did. She followed in the footsteps of St Helena, mother of Constantine, and went to Egypt to meet the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

The first Desert Father was St Anthony the Great of Egypt who, in about 270 CE, abandoned his life and property and walked out into the Nitrian Desert in Egypt where he took to physically and psychologically torturing himself. He gained some notoriety for doing this, because it's weird and humans love to look at weird things. He swiftly became a bit of an attraction, to his annoyance, but what really infuriated him was the people who kept turning up and insisting that they be his disciple. Largely this meant starving themselves in his vicinity and occasionally prostrating themselves at his feet. He hated all of it. He hated people, so he kept fleeing to ever more remote bits of the desert. He passed most of his life being pursued from one isolated spot in the Egyptian desert to the next by an ever-growing number of followers attempting to be taught by him as he retreated ever further into the wilds to avoid them.[7]

All very *Life of Brian*, but it had a real impact. He died in 356 CE at the impressive age of 105 years,[8] by which time scores of men and women inspired by his rejection of the physical world in all its manifestations, from his family to his own hunger, had set themselves up for lives of sacred sandy misery. Some stayed in silent, solitary cells while others formed little communities of Christian suffering.

This was the beginning of Christian monasticism, and Melania, itching with Christian passion in Rome, wanted to see it for herself. According to Palladius, who knew her, travelled with her and wrote a short but glowing hagiography, Melania spent six months travelling around the Nitrian Desert visiting the various communities and learning about this new world of total asceticism. One of the women she visited, according to Palladius, was Alexandra, a woman of low birth who, at the time of Melania's visit, had been voluntarily walled up in a tomb for a decade. Melania sat outside Alexandra's chosen prison and asked Alexandra why she had chosen her new life inside a cave. Alexandra's answer was mildly bananas, but perfectly in keeping with Christianity's already dodgy approach to women and sex: she said that she had found out a man fancied her and that his crush 'distressed his mind'. She didn't return his affections but also she didn't want to 'afflict or disparage him', so instead of simply avoiding him, she chose to avoid all men. She chose to bury herself alive in her tomb rather than 'cause a soul made in the image of God to stumble'.[9] You can see that the promise of freedom offered by Christian life was a strange and limited one.

It's also very much in line with the talking points around male desert monasticism, particularly those who chose to live solitary desert lives. A lot of the stories about male desert monks focus on their agonies around their main concern:

sex. Beginning with St Anthony, it's very common to have 'the devil' appear to the monk in the form of a sexy lady (and/or a sexy young boy) and try to tempt them into sin. This vision results in some very physical fights with the demons. Sexual renunciation was the hardest battle of all for male Christians, their literal battle with Satan in the form of spontaneous erections.[10] Palladius writes about a conversation with a Desert Father who told him that he had been living in the desert for twelve years and 'the demon gave me no respite in his attacks by night and day … He changed himself into an Ethiopian maiden, whom I had once seen in my youth in the summertime picking reeds and sat on my knee.' The monk was so tormented by his own unending desire that he twice attempted to kill himself.[11] Life as a Desert Father was an agony of constantly thinking about tits and attempting to control one's misbehaving penis through fasting and occasional self-harm.

For Desert Mothers, on the other hand, sex is never presented as a problem. Roman men did not really think that women were actually attracted to them. Melania asked Alexandra, for example, what she did with her time in her tomb, whether she got bored or stressed or fell into soul-crushing apathy. Alexandra replied that she spent nine hours a day spinning flax and meditating, followed by several hours of praying on the apostles, martyrs and saints. Then, having eaten her daily allowance of dry bread, she lay down patiently 'waiting for my end with cheerful hope'.[12] Which is nice. Because all the Christian sources post Perpetua were written by men, they are basically incapable of imagining that women had sex drives. Female saints are pretty much universally depicted as victims of male sexual desire and prisoners in marriages they long to escape. This trope says absolutely nothing about how Christian women experienced sexual renunciation and desire and everything about how male Christians saw their female partners but that's beside the point. As far as male Christian writers were concerned, sex was a male problem and pride was a female problem. Female ascetics, usually unnamed, are instead constantly being slagged by male Christian writers for being improperly ascetic or pretending for clout.

Having visited many Desert Fathers and Mothers and given away huge amounts of silver and gold to them, Melania seemed to be loving her experiences. This was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her, and she was adored because she was useful. Desert ascetism living in a tomb having her meditations constantly interrupted by tourists asking questions didn't seem to appeal to her that much, but she loved being a part of the Egyptian Christian community and she really found her place there six months after her arrival when she got caught up in a dramatic, and bloody, inter-Christian war.

In 373 CE, Athanasius, the Nicene pope of Alexandria, died and the eastern emperor Valens took the opportunity to attempt to make Alexandria an Arian city. He arrested Athanasius's Nicene successor and then set about forcibly converting the clergy of Alexandria to Arianism, using the well-worn techniques of the persecutions: torture, execution and enslavement.[13] The numbers given by the Christian writers about this event are also typically unreliable. Melania's friend and survivor of the persecution claimed three thousand monks were arrested, while Paulinus of Nola said five thousand monks were exiled, which may feel like a *lot* for a single city because it is.[14] Palladius names eleven exiled bishops, who were run out of Alexandria.[15] These bishops went, appropriately, to Galilee in Palestine accompanied by Melania who used her enormous riches to support them. She paid for their food, their lodging and all the other needs of the sad and persecuted bishops. She effectively acted as their patron and supporter, rather than a consecrated ascetic herself.

Once she arrived in Palestine, Melania found that it was not much more welcoming to the exiled Nicene bishops and she was forbidden by the governor from supporting them. To get around the prohibition, Melania disguised herself as an enslaved woman to sneak food and provisions into their house, whereupon she found herself arrested and imprisoned. The Roman governor of Palestine, believing that she was an unprotected enslaved woman, put Melania on trial and attempted to extort money out of her, attempting to make her pay a bribe for her own release. His attempted corruption forced Melania to shed her disguise, throw off her polite humility at the feet of the bishops she supported and reassert her secular authority to thoroughly berate him. Knowing full well that Roman law at this time forbade the imprisonment of someone of her rank, and that she outranked the governor in every possible way, she crushed him: 'For my part, I am So-and-So's daughter and So-and-So's wife, but I am Christ's slave. And do not despise the cheapness of my clothing. For I am able to exalt myself if I like, and you cannot terrify me in this way or take any of my goods.'[16] The governor dropped to his knees in apology, begged forgiveness from the consular lady and granted her special permission to minister to the exiles without being bothered.

This is an interesting example of the careful balancing act of aristocratic asceticism, which often involved them giving up just enough to suffer bodily without ever having to suffer socially. Melania, for example, is relentlessly praised for selling all her movable goods and giving away ludicrous sums of money. She gave three hundred pounds of silver to a Desert Father named Pambo without it making a tiny dent in her savings.[17] She also had an impressive line in personal asceticism. Two anecdotes from late in her life demonstrate the pride she took in her total rejection of personal adornment and, disgustingly, hygiene. Paulinus, bishop of Nola (in southern Italy), described Melania arriving to visit him dressed in black rags and riding a worn-out horse, while her son and the rest of her family dressed in crimson silks and rode in gilded carriages. Melania's insistence on the rags and the suffering horse served only to make everyone admire her, aware that she chose to be uncomfortable. Palladius recounts a personal interaction he witnessed while travelling with her and Jovinus, bishop of Ascalon, between Israel and Egypt. They came to rest in Pelusium in the Nile Delta in blazing Egyptian heat, filthy from travelling and caked in sweat. Jovinus, unthinkingly, reacted as most of us would and he washed his hands and face in nice cool water before lying down. He forgot he was with Christian aristocracy and that Christian aristocracy did not fuck about when it came to bodily renunciation. Melania snorted at the bishop's apparent weakness with contempt and scolded him like a particularly horrible headteacher:

> How dare you at your age, when your blood is still vigorous, thus coddle your flesh, not perceiving the mischief that is engendered by it? Be sure of this, be sure of it, that I am in the sixtieth year of my life and except for the tips of my fingers neither my feet nor my face nor any one of my limbs have touched water, although I am a victim to various ailments and the doctors try to force me. I have not consented to make the customary concessions to the flesh, never in my travels have I rested on a bed or used a litter.[18]

People might reasonably wonder whether she would have suffered fewer ailments had she washed her hands before eating but those people would be Bad Christians.

For all her rags and hygiene issues, though, Melania never stopped being wildly rich. She opened a monastery and a connected convent on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and spent twenty-seven years running it with her friend Rufinus, funding the lives of fifty consecrated virgins and an equal number of monks. On top of this huge expense, she gave lavishly to other churches and monasteries across Egypt, Israel and Palestine and provided for an untold number of pilgrims who arrived in Jerusalem to see the holy sites, the True Cross, the Holy Sepulchre, the Rock of the Anointing and so on. All this cost money; money that came from the staggering income her land and estates across the Roman Empire generated and the cash sent by her son and family, who lived their Christian lives in Rome.[19]

This is why Melania had hung out in Rome for a decade making sure Publicola had both a confirmed career and a proper guardian before she embarked on her life of Christian dedication: she needed that cash to keep flowing to her. She wanted to live 'humbly', in filth and itching and hard beds, but she wanted it to always be a choice. She never wanted to actually be *forced* to wear rags or forced to live on hard bread and water because asceticism is meaningless if it isn't a choice.[20] If it isn't an ostentatious surrender of luxury then, well, it's just being poor, isn't it? And being actually poor and hungry and living your life with no meaning or control isn't cool at any point in history. Cosplaying poverty while doling out your millions to those you deem worthy, creating for yourself a very high social position, elevated only further by your refusal to wash your face, is, however, extremely good and Melania was extremely good at it.

For twenty-seven years, Melania ruled as a proto-abbess and patron in the Holy City, meeting and greeting all the visitors who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and all the movers and shakers in the Christian world. Her virgins adhered to the Monastic Rule of St Basil, translated into Latin and popularised by her friend and confidant Rufinus. Written in 356 CE as a kind of FAQ for people with questions about Basil's own monastery in Cappadocia, Basil's rule emphasised intellectual life, scriptural study and engagement with work and community over solitary austerity and suffering.

As a brief aside, in his history of Christian ascetics, Palladius praises several women who ran monasteries and particularly notes that one, Abba Talis, was so loved by the virgins in her monastery that she didn't need to lock them in: 'no key even was fixed on the outer wall of the monastery, as in other monasteries.'[21] This is a rare hint at the reality of monastic life away from the rich and powerful aristocratic women who founded and ran them, and who found personal freedom in their ostentatious charity. For every upper-class saint there were fifty or sixty enslaved or lower-class virgins – many of them enslaved by the saint – forced into a life of starvation, filth, hair shirts and ugly tunics and a total lack of even thinking about sex, who had to be kept locked in to prevent them from legging it with any available handsome stranger. Melania's contemporary, Paula, set up a monastery in Bethlehem where she arranged her virgins into three orders according to their personal wealth and each order ate and worked separately. This terrible arrangement seems to undermine the very purpose of undertaking a consecrated life but also emphasises how little the emergence of monasticism and asceticism was actually allowed to subvert the social reality of the Roman world.[22] Asceticism didn't offer power to the powerless; it merely reframed the power of the powerful.

In Melania's monastery (where they presumably did lock the poor virgins in), intellectual engagement was prioritised because that was Melania's special interest. Melania was lucky to never fully fall in with St Jerome in Rome and get caught up in his freakish obsession with starvation and self-mortification. Jerome arrived in

Rome just after Melania had left and gathered around himself a collection of aristocratic women who became – in effect – the kind of horrid little cult that would make him the star of every true crime podcast if it weren't for the fact that all the evidence we have about it comes directly from Jerome himself. His favourite female protégée was Paula, a widowed mother of five in her thirties when she met Jerome and fell for him. She handed over three of her daughters to him to be raised as consecrated virgins and he enthusiastically encouraged them to starve themselves. The great Peter Brown described him as engaging in 'ascetic grooming'.[23] Jerome praised Paula's daughter Blaesilla with breathless creepiness, thrilled because '[h]er steps tottered with weakness, her face was pale and quivering, her slender neck scarcely upheld her head' in a letter he wrote after she managed to die of starvation a mere three months after her conversion to Jerome's horrid version of Christianity.[24] 'No other woman could ever give me pleasure but one I never saw eat', he wrote, in praise of Paula herself, because he was terrifying.[25] A pale, suffering, weak woman in pain and misery was his favourite kind of woman and it was gross.[26] He and Paula were effectively run out of Rome over Blaesilla's death, because even other Christians found Jerome freakish. Melania, thankfully, got into her own version of asceticism before she met him and as a result was able to continue eating enough and reading enough to get into arguments with him instead.

Aside from the rise of asceticism, fourth-century Christianity may be characterised by theological controversies. These continually had Christian bishops accusing one another of being demons and/or very stupid indeed. Melania and Jerome got into it over the works of a third-century theologian named Origen of Alexandria. During his lifetime, Origen had been enormously prolific and famous. He even allegedly met and corresponded with Julia Mamaea while she was Augusta. During a theological conflict, one of his enemies accused him of taking Matthew 19.12 too literally and castrating himself, which is pretty funny.[27] It's especially funny because part of what made Origen contentious in the fourth century was his insistence that literal readings of the Bible were baby theology and that advanced theologians engaged in allegorical readings.

In the 390s CE, a conflict broke out because Melania and her friend Rufinus were passionate Origenists who began financially supporting an up-and-coming theologian, Evagrius of Pontus. Evagrius developed an Origenist theology of asceticism. This news, and Rufinus, made it to Rome and prompted some of Jerome's acolytes to get involved, in particular an aristocratic woman called Marcella who wrote to Jerome and demanded that he write to oppose Rufinus. Jerome and his half-starved followers believed that Rufinus, by translating Origen and Evagrius, was doing the devil's work and perverting proper Christians like themselves.[28] Jerome wrote a great many letters and treatises against Rufinus and Origen and he repeatedly called Rufinus 'Grunnius Corocotta Porcellus' – Piggy Grunter, because Jerome had issues.[29] He considered Melania to be utterly defiled by her association with Origenism, and refused to name her, calling her instead 'she whose name means blackness and testifies to the blackness of her soul.'[30]

What's notable about this argument is not that it occurred or that Melania was involved but how thoroughly her contributions – and those of Jerome's female followers – have been erased from the record. Jerome's surviving letters and treatises clearly show that Paula and Marcella and other aristocratic women in Rome were passionately involved in high-level theological disputes in person and in writing. Jerome claims that Rufinus's translations and writings were heavily influenced by his conversation and correspondence with Melania on theological

concerns. We have testimony that Melania didn't sleep and stayed up all night reading Origen and Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, as well as theologians of her own time.[31] She and Jerome's followers were all vigorous and vital drivers of the controversies and debates that shaped orthodox Christian thought and practice, the debates which meant that Jerome is now considered to be a Great Church Father and a Doctor of the Church and one of the most influential figures in Christian history and thus human history. And yet the women whose words and thoughts contributed to his doctrines are gone. Their letters and replies are not saved. Their ideas are folded into the men's and their contributions are swallowed, their writing totally suppressed. The history of Christian thought becomes a history of men writing to one another, and the women they talked to vanish. But the Origenist controversy more than most shows that they were there, vigorously engaging with theological and practical disputes. Without Melania's money and interest, Evagrius and Rufinus get nowhere. Without Marcella's indignation and social power, Jerome isn't prompted to intervene. We've been here before: women are the invisible drivers of all of it.

After twenty-seven years in Jerusalem, Melania decided to return to Rome and see her family and her son. She was now sixty years old and Publicola had married a consular woman and had a daughter, named after her grandmother. Melania rolled up in Rome in 400 CE with a retinue of (probably enslaved) holy women, a sad-looking horse and a gleam of evangelical zeal in her eye. They took a spin to visit Paulinus in Nola (he was either an uncle or a cousin) and he claimed that Melania gave him a chunk of the True Cross, which speaks to Melania's standing in Jerusalem. The True Cross, on which Christ had allegedly been crucified, developed its own mythology while Melania was in Jerusalem, largely driven by Rufinus who was one of the originators of the story that Constantine the Great's mother Helena found and identified it. There was certainly *a bit of wood* on display in Jerusalem which people believed was the True Cross, and people were absolutely taking chunks of it away as relics. One of the earliest accounts of kissing the cross (as people still do in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre) is from a virgin named Egeria on pilgrimage in 384 CE who claimed bishops closely guarded every visitor because a pilgrim once took a bite out of it.[32] Already in 400 CE, the True Cross was a tiny stump and the bishops were highly sensitive about it. That Melania was allowed to take a bit of it and give it away as a gift suggests she had a whole lot of social power in the city and that she wasn't afraid to exercise it for her own personal gain.

Then Melania returned to Rome. When she had left, she had been at the extreme end of an official religion but had been a distinct outlier as a Christian in Rome; many considered the city to be the last bastion of polytheism in the empire. Between 389 and 391 CE, however, the emperor Theodosius I took his chance as the (last) sole ruler of the entire empire to outlaw polytheism. He made Christianity the official religion of the whole empire, banned sacrifice and all traditional worship of the ancient gods, and generally encouraged the destruction of statues and temples.[33] He made an effort to remove the ancient trappings of Roman religion from the reality of running the Roman Empire. Everything, from the protection of Vesta to the sacrifice of victims to Jupiter and Mars, was legislated against. So when Melania returned to Rome, it was as a triumphant majority, blessed by God and the state. She bore the holy glow of a rich woman in itchy rags and the smug aura of a woman who had been ahead of the curve. This was the woman who met her granddaughter for the first time.

When Melania met her namesake, Melania the Younger was – like herself – a teenage bride. She was the only member of her generation for two very ancient, very venerable, very, very rich families and so she had been sent out to do her duty and keep the family going. Melania the Elder had done this with her own son; rather than taking him to a life of Christian perfection with her, she had installed him in the Senate to continue the family line and family wealth. Paula did the same thing. She sent four daughters into Jerome's school of terrifying virginity but had married her only son (ludicrously named Toxotius) off without even bothering to baptise him. The days of Christians obtaining eternal glory by abandoning their families and worldly lives ended when the persecutions ended. Instead, bishops now wrote works called things like *On the Good of Marriage* and rebuked women in their congregations who tried to leave their husbands. Christianity had changed; it was no longer an apocalypse cult waiting for the end times. The Church needed to continue. Now, a version of Christianity alien to St Perpetua prevailed and, even to the most devoted of Christian saints, protecting the family name and wealth remained a serious concern over and above any worries about the purity of the immortal soul.[34] Thus it was that when Publicola and his wife Albina only had a surviving daughter, they found her an appropriate husband and expected her to do her job as an aristocratic woman. Unfortunately for the whole family, Melania the Younger was of another generation and had had enough of this mortal world. She also had fertility issues, possibly because she was so young. She had suffered several stillbirths and miscarriages before she turned twenty. Asceticism offered her a way to avoid suffering any more. She also thought her granny was extremely cool, and possibly had taken the somewhat apocalyptic words of her grandmother a bit too seriously. When Melania told her family that 'As it was foretold four hundred years ago, this is the final hour',[35] she probably didn't mean for her granddaughter and grandson-in-law to declare that they were now in a chaste, spiritual marriage and that they would be selling all their property and estates.

The selling of movable goods wasn't a problem, particularly. Melania positively encouraged her entire family to sell up their carriages and silks and jewellery and join her in a modest life of gentle asceticism. But the selling of estates absolutely was. Melania's family-owned ancestral property stretched across the whole western empire, collected up over the centuries of Roman rule. Pretty much all of the land in the west which *could* be owned by the aristocratic classes was now within their grasp. As Senators were forbidden from doing business or earning money through anything other than land estates, and as the Senatorial class kept growing, selling land to any old random buyer was a massive blow to the concentrated wealth of the whole class of Roman Senators and it caused pure panic. Melania the Younger and her husband were sued by both sets of parents to prevent the sales of estates in Spain, Aquitaine, Tarragona and Gaul. They even attempted to get the western emperor, Honorius, involved to prevent the sales on the basis that the couple were under twenty-five and thus too young to know what they were doing. This bid was unsuccessful. The estates were all sold and Melania the Younger freed eight thousand enslaved people. Not her own attendants, however; those, she forced into Christian asceticism and let them eat only every other day.[36] Nice girl.

Melania the Elder represents a significant shift in Roman life and its relationship with Christianity, and she shows how families and traditions spanning a thousand years could be gradually, softly eroded by one individual decision after another to change priorities. She never knew a world where Christianity was illegal or an act of violent resistance. She never saw Christians gored in the arena and so, to Melania and many of her contemporaries, it wasn't necessary to choose between

Romanness and Christianity. She was among the first who didn't have to pick between saying I am a Christian or I am a Roman. She could say *Christiana Romana sum*, I am a Christian Roman. Thus, she also represents the shift from the Roman Empire to the Roman Christian Empire.

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† OK, full disclosure, this is medieval invention and St Nick possibly never even existed but it is a strong legend in Greek Orthodox Christianity and it's *funny*. Pearse, 2015.

‡ The Nicene Creed affirms the consubstantiation of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ as both wholly God and wholly man. It has been slightly modified since 325 CE but is still a basis for the Catholic Church and most mainstream churches. Arianism, which still exists as various non-Trinitarian churches, argued that God the Father and Christ the Son were separate, hierarchical entities and that the Son was wholly man before being made God.

Galla Placidia

414 CE

The Last Roman

The broad strokes of the life of Galla Placidia are, frankly, unremarkable in Roman history. In any royal history. She was born a princess, married to a foreigner to create an alliance, widowed, remarried to a general to cement his succession to the throne, widowed again, became regent to her minor son, built some buildings, did some patronage, had a stressful, rebellious daughter and then died peacefully in her bed in her sixties. Almost all of those events could be copied and pasted from the life of any Roman Augusta over the previous 450 years of Roman monarchical rule. What makes Placidia interesting is that she was the last of these women to exist in Rome itself, and in the whole of empire west of Sarajevo and Benghazi. Following Placidia's death in 450 CE, and the almost immediate death of her son Valentinian III in 455 CE, the western Empire was never united under a single family again.

She is also more interesting than most Roman empresses because the clichéd beats of female life played out against a backdrop of war, battles, murders, wars and more wars, usually characterised using the words 'decline', 'fall' and 'collapse', with historians both ancient and modern deploying the terms 'barbarians' and 'invasions' a lot. It's hard to get around that lens on the fifth century CE when you are reading or writing about men, because literally all they are doing is battles and murders and it's awful. When you explore this period through the lens of Galla Placidia, however, you get a whole different perspective, emphasising both the unbelievable power of the idea of the Roman Empire and its trappings, and the almost universal desire for the continuation of the Roman Empire among its alleged enemies. We also see how thoroughly embedded Christianity became into imperial Romanness and how the Church offered whole new paths for women in power.

Galla Placidia was born somewhere in the region of 390 CE, probably in Constantinople. She was the only daughter of the eastern emperor Theodosius the Great and his second wife. Theodosius had an unusual route to the eastern throne and made unusual policies. He came up under the western emperor Gratian, who first invited him to leave a mysterious mid-career retirement and become his right-hand man (*magister militum*; master of soldiers) and then offered him the job of eastern emperor. Theodosius turned out to be a brilliant soldier–emperor who managed to briefly consolidate the entire empire under one ruler, and then hand over the thrones to his sons. Honorius, aged about ten, inherited the western half, while Arcadius, aged maybe eighteen, took the eastern. Placidia's story doesn't start properly, however, until 408 CE, when the Goths arrived in Rome.

The Gothic Wars, as they are called, lasted for decades and are complex.[1] For now, all you need to know is that the Goths as a group began as a mass of refugees from the lands north of the Danube. Ancient sources located them as having originated in the region of modern-day Ukraine and western Russia, and they fled across thousands of miles to crash up against the Danube in Serbia because war had come to them. From even further north-east, a people known as the Huns appeared

roaring out of central Asia – somewhere in the region of Kazakhstan and Mongolia – like a precursor to Genghis Khan and terrorised the inhabitants of many towns and villages who had previously lived happily outside of Roman interest around the Don River and the Black Sea. Men, women and children fled their homes and ran as far as they could from the seemingly unstoppable mounted archers of the Huns (extremely Genghis Khan, you see). They only stopped because they hit an imperial border that saw them as a hostile enemy and would not let them cross. Years of slaughters, battles, treaties and negotiations continued. While the men, women and children termed Goths by the Roman Empire may have started out wanting only to get into the empire and hang out, they ended up wanting to take revenge for their unjust treatment by a Roman imperial system which exclusively perceived them as an invading army.

Over about four decades, the Goth situation escalated as they got crosser and more organised, and through the making and breaking of enough treaties to fill a small library. By the dawning of the fifth century, the Gothic people were organised under the leadership of one man, Alaric, and had built up the capability to fight the Roman Empire. By 408 CE, they had done so well at this that an enormous Gothic army landed at the gates of Rome and besieged it. In 410 CE, they broke through the walls and sacked the city. 'The bright light of all the world was put out, or, rather, the Roman Empire was decapitated, and, to speak more correctly, the whole world perished in one city', wrote Jerome from Bethlehem.[2] 'Rome the mistress of the world, shuddered, crushed with dismal fear at the sound of the shrieking trumpet, and the shouts of the Goths', wrote Pelagius, who was there.[3] Shockwaves reverberated through the whole empire. Everything from the bronze statues in the Forum to the gold earrings in women's houses were taken. Although Alaric's troops were disciplined and spared the Romans a general massacre, hundreds of thousands of refugees – including Melania the Younger – fled the city, fled Italy, and made their way on any vessel they could find to Egypt, Africa, Greece and Turkey. To anywhere except Rome. The whole empire shuddered as though hit by a meteor. For polytheists and Christians alike, the sack of Rome meant the end of the world.

Galla Placidia, Roman princess, watched it all. She had arrived in Rome sometime around 195 CE, travelling with her brother Honorius but never joining the imperial court he set up in Ravenna. Instead she lived with a despised foster mother, Serena, in Rome among the Senators and next door to the Melanias. Thus, she was in Rome when the first Gothic wave broke against the Aurelian Walls, spreading famine throughout the city in 408 CE, and in the second storm she was still there in her palace watching the Roman people who hadn't left weep in the streets from hunger. Although she was the daughter of the Divine Theodosius the Great, the granddaughter of the Divine Valentine I, the sister of both the emperors who ruled the Roman Empire – Honorius in the west and Arcadius in Constantinople – and the foster daughter of Stilicho, who had *de facto* run the western empire as Honorius's *magister militum* for two decades, Placidia did not flee Rome until she was forced to. By Alaric. When he kidnapped her.[4] Instead, she was the only member of the imperial family present in Rome to witness its first breach in eight hundred years, and she was the first imperial woman to ever be taken into the custody of an enemy.

In a neat bit of history rhyming, rumours spread throughout the empire that the Goths had been able to breach Rome's walls only because a woman had opened the gates. Procopius claimed an aristocratic woman named Faltonia Proba snuck out and let Alaric in, not to betray the city, but to save it. The rumour said that Proba – a real woman, the daughter, wife and mother of consuls and correspondent of St

Augustine – ended the siege in order to end the suffering and starvation within the city, which had driven Romans to cannibalism.[5] Unlike her spiritual predecessor Tarpeia, Proba escaped with her life and fortune and died in Africa decades later.

There are no actual details of Galla Placidia's kidnap in the ancient sources, no dramatic recounting of her fighting off attackers or her years of captivity. Simply less interesting than the antics of another bloody general, unfortunately. But she spent three years being transported around Italy and France by the Gothic army. She attended Alaric's funeral when he died suddenly and the Gothic army devised a feat of civil engineering so impressive even the Roman army had to appreciate it. In order to prevent Alaric's grave from being desecrated by the Romans, the Gothic army built a dam and temporarily diverted the River Busento in Calabria, dug a grave in the river bed and then destroyed the dam, protecting Alaric with an entire river.[6] Sources both ancient and modern relentlessly portray the Goths as a homogeneous mass of lumpen barbarians – I find myself imagining Tolkien's orcs when I read a lot of descriptions of them, brutish and hairy and inhuman – but these occasional descriptions of astonishing engineering knowledge, resources and ability serve to undermine that image considerably. Anyway, with Alaric dead, his brother-in-law Athaulf took over as leader and led his people to Narbonne in France where he did something genuinely extraordinary, changing the face of Roman-Gothic relations completely and forever: he married Galla Placidia.

The marriage between Placidia and Athaulf, the Roman imperial princess and the Gothic barbarian king, occurred after four years of Placidia being a Gothic hostage, and unsurprisingly sparked a lot of romantic fictions. In some, Placidia is a weeping victim, the delicate beauty forced into marriage with her barbarian, trouser-wearing captor. In others, Placidia and Athaulf fall in love over the years of travel and choose to marry for romantic reasons.[7] In fairness, Athaulf is described by the Roman sources as being a total babe. Jordanes says he was 'a man of imposing beauty … distinguished for beauty of face and form.'[8] None of the ancient sources suggest that Placidia was coerced in any way, and most emphasise that she had an active role as her new husband's adviser. The Christian chronicler Orosius (whose book has the unambiguous title *Seven Books Against the Pagans*) suggests that Placidia's kidnap was a divine gift to the world because their marriage was so good.[9] The marriage made Athaulf, a man who had sacked Rome and fought the Roman army, a member of the imperial family of Theodosius the Great. He became the brother-in-law of Honorius, ruling lethargically from Ravenna, and the uncle of the new child emperor Theodosius II in Constantinople (Arcadius died in 408 CE). The marriage gave the Goths what they had always wanted: it brought them into the empire.

Placidia and Athaulf's marriage demonstrates the unbelievably powerful hold Romanness had on the minds of the Goths (and everyone else). You might expect, as the Goths were perceived to be a foreign race with foreign culture and a dedication to trousers that proper Romans found to be truly disgusting, and as they were technically occupying the city of Narbonne, that they would celebrate some kind of traditional 'Gothic' wedding ceremony. You would be wrong. The sources show that Athaulf and Placidia went out of their way to celebrate a wedding so Roman even Cicero would recognise it. They held it in a traditional and ancient Roman villa, owned by one of the leading men of Roman Narbonne. Placidia wore a Roman imperial dress and sat in a hall decorated 'in the Roman manner'.[10] Most strikingly, Athaulf dressed in 'a Roman general's cloak and other Roman clothing', presenting himself as a Roman official. Three poets performed traditional Roman wedding poems and Athaulf presented his bride with marital gifts of fifty enslaved

men (we can never escape the ubiquitous horror of slavery) and piles of gold, silver and gems appropriate to her status as a *nobilissima puella*.[11] Placidia was now both a Roman princess and a Gothic queen and saw no conflict between those roles. With this act, whether she knew it or not in the moment, Placidia ended the Gothic Wars, after four decades, an unthinkable amount of bloodshed and the violation of Rome.

Orosius, who wrote his book in the immediate aftermath of the 410 CE sack as an attempt to explain what the hell was happening to himself and his readers, recounts an anecdote to describe the effect of Placidia's marriage to Athaulf. He says he personally overheard a conversation between a man from Narbonne and our old nightmare friend St Jerome while in Bethlehem.[12] He heard the Narbonnese guy explain to Jerome that Athaulf's original plan had been to conquer the Roman Empire and transform it into a Gothic empire: 'so that, to use the popular expressions, Gothia should take the place of Romania, and he, Athaulf, should become all that Caesar Augustus once had been.' Since marrying Placidia, however, Athaulf had been advised by her, had been 'civilised' by her and had changed his ambitions. He now instead wished to deploy Gothic power in the service of Rome and be its restorer, not its transformer.

In describing this, Orosius somewhat undermines his own anecdote by having his third-hand Athaulf describe his own people as 'utterly incapable of obeying laws because of their unbridled barbarism'. I'm afraid I simply cannot take this seriously as something that anyone would say about their own people, people who had spent *decades* together as a successful and coherent army. But that was Orosius's view of the Goths in the wake of the Gothic Wars so we can allow him some leeway. Anyway, he claims that Placidia personally and single-handedly talked Athaulf out of his desire to become an Augustus and to take the empire for himself, and instead persuaded him that the Goths could be powerful as allies within the empire. He could fight alongside the Roman army, under the leadership of her brother and nephew and alongside Honorius's new *magister militum* Constantius.

Over the next year, Athaulf and Placidia and the army pootled down to Barcelona in Spain for no real reason other than it is a brilliant city, where Placidia gave birth to the son who must have seemed like a gift from God, blessing the unity of the two former enemies. Demonstrating an agency and a force of will which would serve her for her whole life, Placidia named her son after her father. Little Theodosius was born in 415 CE.[13]

The union of the Goths and Romans in Placidia's marriage and motherhood lasted just a few months. The pinnacle of her peaceful achievement was probably Easter Sunday in April 415 CE, when baby Theo was baptised in the basilica in Barcelona. The final heartbreak came when Athaulf died mere weeks after he and Placidia had buried their son in a silver coffin in that same basilica. Theodosius died at just a few months old, taken by one of the myriad unknown things that killed babies in the pre-modern world and irreparably skewed demography stats. Athaulf died of something known colloquially in the fifth-century west as 'the Gothic disease' but more often called political assassination.[14] An underling stabbed him in the balls because of a grudge.[15] He survived just long enough to pass on his dying wish that his wife be returned to her brother to maintain Roman friendship.

You might be wondering what the hell the emperor had been doing all these years while his sister was being dragged around southern Europe as, technically, a prisoner of a foreign invading force. Honorius had, after 413 CE, sent troops led by

his mate Constantius to try and punish the Goths, but negotiating efforts on Honorius's part could not be described as vigorous. In fairness, little Honorius ever did could be described as vigorous (except perhaps the regeneration of Ravenna, which he inexplicably and singlehandedly transformed from a damp Italian backwater into the magnificent seat of imperial power in the west). The fact that Placidia lived in Rome prior to her kidnapping, rather than with her half-brother in his palace, suggests he saw her as an outsider to his imperial court and that he was not personally concerned with her well-being. And, in fairness, he had a lot of distractions to deal with during Placidia's time with the Goths. Traditional histories recount a litany of attempted usurpers and fights, including the total abandonment of the province of Britain.[16] Placidia simply wasn't the highest priority for a while.

Eventually, Constantius started chasing the Goths around and refusing to give them food, finally convincing Athaulf on his deathbed that the Goths had a choice between returning Placidia and starving to death in Spain, stuck between the Romans to the north and Vandals in Africa. Don't imagine this as a great victory for Honorius and Constantius, though, as Athaulf's successor Wallia was able to negotiate a constant supply of grain, a contract to work *for* the Roman Empire instead of against it, and – finally – a home for his people in Gaul.[17]

In the space of a few weeks, Placidia went from being the honoured wife of the leader of the Goths and mother to a successor to both the Gothic and Roman thrones, to a widow weeping at her child's grave. Now, with some reluctance, she was escorted to Ravenna by a retinue of Gothic soldiers who would stay by her side until the day she died. She arrived at her brother's new capital in 416 CE, having lived and travelled with the Goths for six years. She returned older, wiser, stronger and steelier, and with her own personal mini army of loyal Gothic soldiers. And she returned to a completely new political position. In her previous life as a princess, she had lived in Rome and somehow remained unmarried until the age of twenty when most Roman princesses were at least betrothed by the age of two. A fairly average age of marriage for members of the imperial family was twelve. For some reason, Honorius never needed to marry her off. He either forgot she existed or thought she was unimportant. This was not a sentiment shared by his ambitious right-hand man Constantius. Constantius saw in Placidia a legitimate connection to the imperial family of Theodosius the Great and he wanted in. Olympiodorus, writing contemporaneously but in the east, and Jordanes, writing about a century later, both accuse Constantius of only trying to rescue Placidia in order to marry her, and portray him as being focused on this one goal.[18]

Placidia, on the other hand, is presented as being actively hostile to the marriage by Olympiodorus. In his telling, Placidia repeatedly rejected Constantius's overtures and her brother's pressures, even as Constantius received honour after honour from the emperor. Eventually, the marriage occurred only because Honorius physically forced Placidia into it: 'he took her by the hand and, despite her protests, gave her over to Constantius, and the marriage was solemnised in the most dazzling fashion'.[19] Notably, Orosius in his books against the pagans does not mention this act of gross violation of a woman's will by a Christian emperor and his Christian second-in-command.[20]

The wedding occurred within a year of Placidia's entrance into Ravenna and marked her full arrival into the centre of western power. Very quickly, she and Constantius had two children – you can make up your own mind about how willing she was to consummate the marriage. You might be interested in the stories told by Agnellus of Ravenna about Placidia spending her nights weeping and praying on the cold, stone floor of the church she had commissioned.[21] You might also note

that first came a little girl, Justa Grata Honoria, followed only a year later by a boy – an heir for Constantius but named by his mother – Flavius Placidus Valentinianus. Following the birth of the boy, when Placidia was about twenty-eight years old, there were no more babies. She had done her duty as a wife and a member of her family. She had provided the male heir for both her brother (who never had any children) and her husband and then she quit baby making. Although she remained in Ravenna with her children, she turned her attention almost entirely to the Church.

Christian sources love Placidia because of her total dedication to the Church as a power-wielding, political entity, as well as her apparently very genuine and intense Christian faith. A notorious story about her relates the appearance of a magician from Asia in the court of Honorius and Constantius who promised he could do magic so powerful he could defeat all barbarian enemies without weapons. According to Olympiodorus, this magician – Libianus – performed a trick in their presence so convincing they were ready to sign him up on the spot. God only knows what illusion the guy could pull off in a Ravenna palace that impressed them so much that they believed he could defeat tens of thousands of armed men, but I have to assume he was one *hell* of a showman. A real monorail salesman of a guy. When someone told Placidia of the new plans, however, she lost her shit. Properly lost it. She not only insisted Honorius and Constantius fire Libianus, she insisted that they *execute* him. She swore, with spectacular vehemence, she would divorce Constantius if he let 'a wizard and unbeliever remain among the living'.[22] Christians really leaned into the whole executions thing once they stopped being on the receiving end, it must be noted. Her threat worked, and Libianus lost his life. For the bishops and popes and Christian men around Placidia this faith and dedication was glorious.

Placidia defined her life after her entrance into the imperial court through her relationship with the Church, in terms of both its people and its buildings, and she found a whole new way to be a public imperial woman who adhered to ancient, embedded ideals about women exerting only soft power through patronage and advice, ideals stretching back to Hersilia. But that soft power when exerted via bishops and popes meant much, much more than merely 'advice'. Through her friendships with powerful Church men, helped along by her enormous generosity, Placidia was able to act in the world in ways no empress had before.

And her generosity to the Church really impressed those bishops, who loved to glorify God through golden things. My Methodist upbringing prevents me from being able to fully enjoy the relationship between huge amounts of gold and divine glory, sadly, but man, her buildings were pretty. She built a Church of the Holy Cross and a Church of St John the Evangelist in Ravenna. The latter still exists as San Giovanni Evangelista, though it was stripped clean in the eighteenth century and bombed during the war so it's somewhat lost its Late Antique sparkle. The Church of the Holy Cross is gone except for a little jewel box of a room known (incorrectly) as the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. It does house tombs, though not Placidia's, but more importantly it houses glass mosaics that genuinely take the breath away in high, barrel-vaulted ceilings. Golden stars glitter against a dark blue sky and a cross radiates light from the centre. Intricate patterns weave along the walls and borders surrounding unbelievable mosaics showing the apostles and animals and Christ the Good Shepherd and an unknown male saint opening a sideboard of burning books. Admittedly, the burning book thing is a bit odd, but the craftsmanship is stunning. Those flames really look like they are swirling. I recommend Googling it and having a gawk because no written description can do

justice to how beautiful and magnificent it is. Assuming that this level of decor covered the whole church, the amount of money and effort Galla spent on glorifying the Church was immense. She also built a church to St Stephen in Ravenna and lavished money on existing churches in Rome. Agnellus notes two items donated by her that were still knocking about in churches when he was writing in the ninth century: a seven-pound lamp made of pure gold inscribed with her own face and the legend 'I will light a lamp for my Christ' and a gold Communion chalice inscribed on the rim with 'I, the empress Galla Placidia offer this to St. Zacharias.'[23]

This kind of behaviour makes a girl incredibly popular among bishops and that could have been the only engagement Placidia had with the Church. She could have been an imperial patron who glorified both God and herself through the ostentatious donation of beautiful golden things with her name and face on them and spent the rest of her life lying in a comfy chair being fed grapes. Instead, out of a perversity I will never understand, Placidia went out of her way to get involved in the vicious world of theological controversies and papal disputes.

The first of these occurred in 419 CE and involves one of my all-time favourite things: anti-popes. The crisis began with the death of Pope Zosimus in Rome in 418 CE and the simultaneous election of two rival successors. The whole affair is *extremely* complicated, so forgive some glibness here. Within days of Zosimus's death, two factions within the Roman Church elected two separate popes, Eulalius and Boniface. In a fit of spite, both factions scheduled their papal consecration ceremonies for the same day, and publicly called the other a false pope, an anti-pope and probably a demon. Tensions escalated until the day of the competing papal ceremonies dawned, when they exploded into riots on the streets of Rome as Boniface and Eulalius's supporters became violently invested in who would be the true successor to St Peter's seat. If the idea of people smashing windows and beating one another like football hooligans because they care that much about who is pope doesn't tickle you, then I'm afraid we can't be friends. Rome's Urban Prefect – who wasn't even a Christian – tapped out of dealing with the whole thing immediately and wrote to Placidia asking for help. Placidia got Honorius involved and then launched herself into trying to resolve the year of the two popes. She and Honorius removed both popes from the city and set up a synod of important bishops to get together and decide who would win and who would be remembered as anti-pope.

Two letters written by Placidia and sent to bishops in Africa and Nola asking them to attend the synod have survived in papal archives. To St Augustine and other bishops from Africa she wrote:

> Although the sacred authority of the emperor, my blood brother, calling upon you to Italy to attend a synod must not be neglected, we deem it vital to add letters of our own serenity in which I pray thee to grant the greatly desired appearance of your beneficial presence without delay, a request that you likewise would consider pleasing to the Almighty.[24]

Here, she notes that Honorius is her 'blood brother', presumably to distinguish him from her brothers in Christ, and she emphasises that she is asking them to come personally. Honorius has asked officially as the emperor but she, as a devout Christian with less formal authority but a lot of soft power in the Church, is also requesting their presence. The implication, to my mind, is that she worried that Augustine and Paulinus and the other distinguished bishops might not turn up for

the emperor. And she deeply cared that they show up because she deeply cared that the papal crisis be resolved. She was invested, so she set herself up as a go-between for the Church and the emperor, a role perfect for an imperial woman.

As it turned out, the synod Placidia put so much time and effort into never happened because Eulalius broke the rules. He turned up in Rome against the express command of the emperor and occupied a church to try and force Honorius's hand. The Roman Senate, for they still existed, sent in soldiers who arrested Eulalius and thus his run ended. Boniface was officially consecrated as pope in April 419 CE.[25] The whole affair, along with the Pelagian Controversy about the nature of free will (which we cannot talk about because we would be here for a week), cemented Placidia as a very important voice in western Christian affairs and a woman who believed she had a right and a duty to involve herself in these matters as a peace-maker and a deal-broker.

Over the next few years, life got dramatic for Placidia once again. We are going to race through the events because they are not that important in the grand scheme of things. In 421 CE, Honorius made Constantius a co-emperor, giving him the name Augustus. At the same time Placidia got the title Augusta and her son, Valentinian, was effectively marked as Constantius's heir to the throne. Constantius, after years of working to become emperor, found that he actually loathed it. He hated the stiff clothes and boring ceremonies and no longer being able to go out with his lads without being looked at. Relatable I reckon. After seven months of being emperor, he gave up and died of pleurisy, leaving Placidia widowed for a second time.[26] She was maybe thirty-two. Shortly after her husband's death, Placidia fell out of favour with Honorius because his replacement *magister militum* convinced the emperor that he had lost a battle against the Vandals not out of incompetence but because the Goths who fought with him had been cowardly and treasonous. For this, he blamed Placidia, claiming that she had influenced the Goths into fighting badly. This argument escalated into a battle between Placidia's Gothic retinue and Honorius's soldiers in Ravenna and ended with Placidia packing up her stuff and her children and storming off to Constantinople.

Pretty much as soon as she arrived in Constantinople in 423 CE, Honorius dropped dead in Ravenna. The stress got to him. Placidia was in the ideal place, though, as she was able to directly engage with the emperor and empress in the east, her nephew and niece Theodosius II and Pulcheria. Theodosius briefly attempted to rule as the sole emperor in the vein of his grandfather and namesake, but when challengers immediately emerged in Rome – most significantly, a 'mild mannered' man called John, which is objectively funny – he succumbed to Placidia's pressure, and proclaimed her son emperor of the west.[27] As Valentinian was six years old in 423 CE, Theodosius formally made Placidia his regent and sent them back to Italy to rule as his partner. They returned triumphantly to Ravenna to take their seats on the thrones her horrible brother and her husband had so recently vacated. Placidia finalised her victory and her homecoming by restoring an old tradition. For the first time in ages, on 23 October 425 CE, a Roman emperor was proclaimed on the streets of the restored, ancient and eternal city of Rome.[28]

Olympiodorus, who was from Egypt but lived in Constantinople in the court of Theodosius II, describes what he knows of the city of Rome from afar with a tone of awe and scarcely believing wonder. He has heard impossible things. Every house is a town, he marvels, 'the city hides ten thousand towns'. He relates with wide-eyed and adorable naivety that each Roman household earns four thousand pounds of gold a year from their properties and that every house in the city holds its own

chariot racing track, its own forum, temples and baths. He describes men spending one, two, four thousand pounds of gold on celebrating their praetorships, on games and races and gifts. He boggles at the wine, the oil, the meat and the produce flowing to the city, making everyone rich and well fed. He is astonished by the size of the Baths of Caracalla, which held 1,600 bathers, and the baths of Diocletian, which were twice the size, blow his mind.[29] Reading most sources and knowing what we know and being aware that Rome was sacked just fifteen years earlier, it is easy to imagine fifth-century Rome as a worn-out, abandoned city. Certainly, it was less crowded than it used to be, but the Gothic sack had been more psychologically traumatic than actually destructive. Rebuilding and repopulation had been swift. The Rome that Placidia paraded through as she crowned her son a true Roman emperor was glorious again. Fifteen years after watching an army rampage through the streets, after being taken into helpless captivity, Placidia reclaimed her home, this time leading the soldiers who sacked it. Serving her revenge cold and glorious.

Placidia ruled the western empire as Valentinian's regent for twelve years and did so extremely well. During that time she built her churches and also built the Valentinian Walls of Ravenna, making the new imperial capital a properly walled city for the first time. Interestingly, she seems to have focused most of her religious energies on Ravenna, but her political energies on Rome, where she heartily engaged with the Senate and their concerns. In 426 CE, she presented the Senate with a discursive list of new laws, known as the Law of Citation for reasons too boring to describe, repeatedly reaffirming the Senators' property rights and legal rights. She also made it legal for mothers to inherit from their sons, which feels like a safety net. Her laws covered things like instituting a hierarchy of judges, the privy purse, and tax relief for Senators. Boring, but important stuff for the smooth and continued running of the Roman Senate as a governing body.[30] She led, in her son's name, an energetic, active and almost old-fashioned Roman imperial government that probably exhausted Honorius from beyond the grave.

The atmosphere of Placidia's regency in the west can be seen in a book called the *Saturnalia* by Macrobius. If you've read this whole book really fast, you might remember Macrobius as the writer who recorded the jokes told by Julia, daughter of Augustus, all those centuries ago. Those appear in the *Saturnalia*, a piece of historical philosophical fiction written in Rome, by Senatorial aristocrat Macrobius, in 431 CE. Right bang in the middle of Placidia's twelve-year regency. It takes the form of a symposium held in the home of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, a real Senator, in the year 384 CE, with all the participants happily discussing the origin and meaning of the Saturnalia festival, the Roman calendar, the works of Virgil (at great, *great* length) and the meaning of luxury. The men reference Cicero and Augustus and Virgil and Seneca as if they were living and speaking in the very earliest years of the imperial monarchy, and basically indulged in a lot of Roman nostalgia for the imagined good old days. The work is set, tellingly, in 384 CE, a couple of years before polytheism stopped being the official religion of the empire, before Gratian removed the statue of Victory from the Senate House and before Alaric violated the walls. The story about Placidia insisting on the death of a wizard might suggest that she had a zealous streak but it appears that she allowed a significant degree of religious pluralism in the city of Rome. The *Saturnalia* describes an idealised atmosphere of nostalgic intellectual engagement, and what Hagith Sivan calls a 'self-congratulatory mode of Roman senatorial aristocracy', restored to peace, the Goths tamed, the wars far away again, and the empress a patient supporter of religious diversity and aristocratic, Senatorial supremacy.[31]

She dealt with, of course, the constant infighting and outfighting of the western Empire, with generals trying to kill one another and Vandals or Huns trying to kill generals, but she did it with the unqualified support of the Goths who still followed Wallia and were now a vital part of Placidia's Roman army. She also incorporated Huns into her administration in the person of Aetius, who became her *magister militum.* Aetius was Roman, a member of the Praetorian Guard (remember them!) but he had been captured by Alaric who had in turn been forced to hand him over to the Huns. He spent several years as a Hunnic hostage, mirroring Placidia's experience, and forged a relationship with them.[32] He came into Placidia's life as an enemy on the side of John of Rome, arriving at the battlefield three days too late with a Hunnic army at his back. Finding John already defeated, he negotiated with Placidia and she ended up giving him a job as a general in her army, plus some cash and land for his soldiers.[33] Over the years he became her greatest support, eventually being called 'the last of the Romans' by Procopius.[34] He is largely given credit for the job that Placidia gave him, of keeping the western empire under Roman rule, and is still considered to be one of the greatest Roman generals of all time.

These subjects are things for other books about the fall of the west though. We are here for Galla Placidia, who was never present at a battle and never again left Italy. In fact, she became more and more focused on Rome as a city of immense importance. But first, she finished her regency. The traditional story of Roman female power says that people should start to demonise her at this point, but Christianity now allowed for new models of imperial womanhood which saw off the accusations of tyranny and grasping female ambition that hounded every imperial Roman woman for a thousand years. A new visual language of imperial womanhood emerged around the time of Theodosius the Great which presented Augustae as rulers first and women second, a complete change from coinage and iconography in the polytheistic government which had always seen and presented imperial women as women who happened to be members of the imperial family, rather than imperial family members who happened to be women.

Polytheistic coins and friezes repeated messages of fertility, virginity and humility for imperial women. They were always mothers and wives first and foremost, accompanying their male relatives who were styled as emperors in military gear. Theodosius I changed this in 383 CE when he presented his wife, Flaccilla, in full military regalia with a diadem, indistinguishable from the representation of an emperor; he made her an Augusta with full equality.[35] The rest of the family ran with this hard and added the iconography of God's hand coming down from heaven to bless both Augustii and Augustae. The official position of the Theodosian Dynasty was that women were also rulers, that their position was ordained by God, and that anyone who disagreed could GTFO.[36] This position was largely backed up by the Church, and it depowered a lot of the classic misogynistic critiques of female rulers. It helped, of course, that Placidia did not prevent Valentinian II from emerging into public life and imperial leadership when he turned twenty-one.

Valentinian married Eudoxia, Theodosius II's daughter, in 437 CE, marking the point when Placidia's regency is considered to be ended and Valentinian is perceived to have taken over the government. Placidia's role did not, however, particularly reduce. She may not have been making final decisions as she did when her son was eleven, but she was still very visible and active in governing the west and in two significant crises, one religious and one secular. The first was the religious crisis going on in the east. It involved a series of semi-unauthorised

councils and debates over the nature of Christ, with bishops being fired and exiled left, right and centre. Placidia got pulled in because the fight escalated into a debate over whether councils outside of Rome were able to make decisions about Christian orthodoxy. The pope, now Leo I, felt that they absolutely could not, and Placidia agreed. Several letters of hers survive in the archives of Leo I written to both Theodosius II and his sister Pulcheria, urging them to intervene and pronounce on the importance of universal orthodoxy among Christians which derived exclusively from the pope in Rome. She wrote with a furious dedication to Rome which shows that it never, ever saw itself as a city on the decline: 'For we ought in all things, in our immortal conduct, to yield the primacy to that city which filled the whole world with the domination of its own virtue, and committed the globe to being governed and preserved by our empire.'[37] To her nephew she pressed the case even harder: 'it is fitting that in all things we should show respect for this glorious city which is the mistress of the whole earth.'[38] This is not the image of a city worried about its place in the world, or an empire feeling, at its centre, like it is failing, however it looked from the outside.

The final crisis of Placidia's life involved her own family, and the bizarre rebellion of her own daughter. Honoria, you might recall, was a year older than her brother Valentinian and had been made an Augusta but had never married for some reason. She spent thirty-odd years living between Rome and Ravenna where she sort of did nothing. No great works of patronage or piety or politics are attributed to her and she is absent from the historical record completely until 449 CE, when she got bored and went wild. It began when she was caught having an affair with a member of her staff, for which he was executed and she was stripped of her title and forced into a betrothal to a willing Senator. So far, so-porific. Her response, however, came straight from left field: possibly inspired by a very romantic view of her mother's first marriage or by a burn-it-all-down attitude, she wrote a letter to the leader of the Huns and asked him to rescue her. With the letter, she enclosed a ring as a promise, and the Hunnic leader took this – rightly or wrongly – to be a proposal of marriage. She thus proposed to Atilla the Hun.[39]

The reality of this story is open to question – in the two most recent biographies of Placidia, one dismisses it as entirely fiction while the other relates it as entirely fact.[40] It does seem bananas, but it was at least in wide circulation during the fifth century that Atilla the Hun attacked Gaul and brought the final hammer blow down on the western empire with a war that would end with Rome being sacked again, properly this time, because he (said he) believed that he had a Roman bride waiting for him in the Eternal City and that her dowry was the western half of the empire. Theodosius II, safe in Constantinople, suggested that Valentinian give Honoria to Atilla in exchange for peace. Valentinian disagreed. He prepared for war against both Huns and his sister and attempted to have his sister executed. Placidia managed to persuade him out of the latter plan. Instead, Honoria was given into her mother's care, and was never heard from again in the historical record. The war with the Huns would outlast them all.

Placidia died in Rome on 27 November 450 CE, peacefully in her sleep. Her final act and her final public appearance were a funeral. Over thirty years after losing him, in the last months of her life, Placidia had the infant Theodosius exhumed from his tomb in Barcelona and re-interred in St Peter's Basilica in Rome. At the time and related to the ongoing debates about papal authority and the relationship between Rome and St Peter, it was believed that those buried close to Rome would get a FastPass to heaven come the Resurrection, and Placidia was apparently worried that her first son would be disadvantaged in the afterlife so she

had him moved. Three decades had passed and she had changed the western world, but Placidia still worried about the immortal soul of her first, Gothic son.

The term ‘last of the Romans’ has been applied to hundreds of men, ranging from Cassius who killed Julius Caesar, to Aetius, to Samuel Johnson, to, bafflingly, the signers of the American Declaration of Independence.[41] It is rarely, if ever, applied to a woman but I think there is a good case that Galla Placidia Augusta deserves it. No emperor or empress after her was as vocally and visibly dedicated to the cause of the city of Rome. None ever voluntarily lived there again, none supported its primacy, none was crowned there and none ever died there peacefully again.† Combining a nostalgia for the imagined Roman past, a respect for the Senatorial aristocracy who continued to run it, and a devotion to the city as especially sacred in Christian theology and imperial politics, Galla Placidia represented a most modern Roman. In some of her coins, minted in Rome and Ravenna, Placidia shows herself wearing a diadem displaying her royalty, crowned with the hand of God reaching from above to bless her with divine sanction, demonstrating her piety and wearing armour to show her status as a fully fledged member of the imperial family.[42] On her shoulder is the Chi Rho of Christ, showing off her devotion a little more. In every sense, she is a perfect Christian, Theodosian empress. On the reverse, however, stands Victoria, the ancient polytheistic goddess of Victory, holding a cross but representing, as she always had, the unending triumph of the eternal city of Rome.

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† Valentinian III was stabbed to death in Rome and his successor died in battle just outside Rome.

Epilogue

Officially, the western Roman Empire 'fell' on 4 September 476 CE, when the Germanic general Odoacer politely packed up the diadem and imperial cloak of the child emperor Romulus Augustulus and quietly removed him from Rome. So little threat did Romulus pose to Odoacer that he didn't even have to leave Italy. Thus ended the supremacy of the city of Rome and its claim to be 'the mistress of the whole earth', with a whimper. The idea of Rome, however, persisted and persisted and persisted. The eastern empire, now better known as the Byzantine Empire, called itself Roman until conquered by the Ottomans in 1461. In the west, the Frankish kingdoms in Gaul continued to call themselves Roman and developed an origin myth that they too had descended from the heroes at Troy. The first Carolingian emperor, Charlemagne, had himself crowned in Rome by the pope and began the Holy Roman Empire (neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire; thanks, Voltaire). The American revolutionaries styled themselves as Roman statesmen and their country in the image of Rome, with the Senate and their neo-classical buildings, and the British imperialists imagined themselves as being shaped and guided by their Roman predecessors.[1] And they also loved a building that looked like a Roman temple. These afterimages of Rome are as masculine as can be: military, imperial, political, philosophical. Of course they are. For so long, the classical world was (and is) a foundation of a form of masculinity that was racialised and idealised as white, western and perfect.

That is the story of Rome and its empire told over and over because the women have been deliberately excluded. Because they were perceived as domestic, small, or as interesting as dogs. But the story of Rome as told *through* women reveals a city, a culture and an empire both the same as and different from the Rome reflected in the memories of other empires. Most significantly, it is a version of Roman history closer to the version the Romans told themselves. It is a bigger, richer empire – a more realistic empire. Because Roman stories always included women. Women were always an integral part of Roman culture and the Roman Empire, which was never exclusively white or western or male, and never perfect. Here I gave you a fraction of the female stories I could have told; there are so many, many more. Women have always been a part of Roman history; they have just been waiting to be heard.

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Unless otherwise stated, all the texts and translations consulted are the Loeb Classical Library editions, which you can access online if you have institutional access. A lot are also available on either Bill Thayer's amazing LacusCurtius site (http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/home.html) or the Tufts University Perseus Digital Library Project at perseus.tufts.edu, both of which are invaluable. Sometimes I fiddled with the translations, just to make them less stodgy. Abbreviations for ancient authors are those used by the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 4th edition, which you can find at https://oxfordre.com/classics/page/3993. The Vindolanda tablets can all be read in original and in translation at: http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/.

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Notes

Introduction

1. Richlin, 2009: 146.
2. Alexievich, 2016: 24.

Tarpeia and Hersilia

1. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.8; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.8; 12; Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 13.
2. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 4.20.7; Suet. *Claud.* 41.
3. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1. Preface.
4. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.7–8.
5. Ibid., 1.2, largely by imitating Greeks in Dionysius's version of things. Hill, 1961.
6. Miles, 1995.
7. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.9; Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 14
8. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.9.5–10.1; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.24; Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 14.
9. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.31; Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 14.l.
10. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.9.7–9.
11. 30, 527 and 638 come from the lost histories of Fabius, Valerius Antias and Juba and are all quoted by Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 14. His own estimation of nearly 800 is in his comparison of Theseus and Romulus; *Parallel Lives* 6. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.13.7 suggests 'somewhat greater than 30', while Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.30 goes for Juba's 638.
12. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.9.12.
13. Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 15.
14. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.9.15.
15. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.45.
16. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.9–10; Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 15–16; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.33–7.
17. Welch, 2015.
18. Plut. *Vit. Rom*. 17; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.37–9; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.11.
19. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.39; Welch, 2015.
20. As above, also Ov. *Met.* 14.742; Cass. Dio, 1.5.3; Prop. *Elegies* 4.4; Welch, 2015.
21. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.42; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.12. A second version of this story has Marcus Curtius throwing himself into a magical cavern as a sacrificial representative of 'what the Romans held most dear' – young men – so that the Roman state would survive forever.
22. Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 19.
23. Ibid.
24. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.13.3–4.
25. Varro, *Ling.* 6.23 records the names Acculeia, Athletarum, Calabra, Hostilia, Julia, Octavia and Tifata.
26. Welch, 2015: 37.
27. Ov. *Met.* 14.805–28.
28. Ibid., 14.829–51.
29. Livy gives Hersilia a second opportunity to act as a soft power in her marriage and in her relationship between the Sabines and the Romans when he has her persuade her husband to spare the men on Antemanates and to encourage them to move to Rome instead. Livy,

Ab urbe condita 1.10.

Tanaquil

1. Ibid., 1.19.
2. Ibid., 1.34; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.46–7.
3. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.34.
4. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.46.
5. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.34; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.47.
6. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.39.
7. Ov. *Fast.* 6.631: '*obsceni forma virilis*'; *Ars am.* 3.18: 'Don't leave out seductive coos and delightful murmurings,/don't let wild words be silent in the middle of your games./You too whom nature denies sexual feeling/pretend to sweet delight with artful sounds … When you like it, show it with cries and panting breath'; Plin. *HN* 36.70: '*genitale e cinere masculi sexus*'.
8. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.2.
9. This appears in Henry T. Bostock and John Boswell's 1855 translation of Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories*, Vol. VI, 384.
10. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.39; 4.2; Plin. *HN* 36.70; Ov. *Fast.* 6.632–4.
11. Plin. *HN* 8.74.
12. Plut. *Quaest. Rom*. 30.
13. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.6 (based on the guesstimate that she was twenty when she married Tarquinius and came to Rome).
14. Livy says they are desperate shepherds, while Dionysius thinks they are just pliable pals disguised as shepherds. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.40; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.72–3.
15. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.41; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.5.
16. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.42.
17. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.43; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.15–22.
18. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.6.
19. The excellent Partial Historians podcast also has an episode on her.
20. Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 36.

Lucretia and Tullia

1. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.53.
2. Ibid., 1.56.
3. Ov. *Fast.* 2.752–6.
4. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.58; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.64–5; Cass. Dio, 2.11.13; Ov. *Fast.* 2.791–812; Diod. Sic. 11.20–1.
5. Diod. Sic. 11.21.
6. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.58; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.65–6. In Dionysius's version, she takes herself to Rome to see her father.
7. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.58; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 66.
8. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.58; Diod. Sic. 11.20.
9. 'Polanski was not guilty of "rape-rape", says Whoopi Goldberg'. *Guardian*, 29 September 2009. www.theguardian.com/film/2009/sep/29/roman-polanski-whoopi-goldberg
10. Diod. Sic. 11.22.
11. Joshel, 2002: 120.
12. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.82; Ov. *Fast.* 2. 813–52; Val. Max. 6.1.1; Diod. Sic. 11.21.
13. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.65.
14. Marz, 1994.

15. Simone, 1999.
16. Matz, 2019; LoCicero, 2008.
17. Cic. *Rep.* 2.46: 'Wherefore, when his elder son violated Lucretia, the daughter of Tricipitinus and wife of Collatinus, and this noble and virtuous woman inflicted the death penalty upon herself as a result of the outrage, Lucius Brutus, a man pre-eminent for wisdom and bravery, freed his fellow-citizens from the unjust yoke of cruel servitude.'
18. Matz, 2019; Valente, 2017: 144.
19. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 4.29.
20. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.46–7.
21. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.46.
22. This was in reference to his social reforms with the centuries and some land redistribution. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.47; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.38.
23. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.48; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.38–9.
24. *Dig.* 48.9.1.
25. Cic. *Rosc. Am.* 25–6.
26. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.38–9; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.47–8; Ov. *Fast.* 6.585–610.

Oppia

1. Raaflaub, 2005.
2. Rüpke, 2016.
3. Rüpke, 2007: 223–5.
4. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.64.5; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.20.3; Plut. *Vit. Num.* 9.5.
5. Greenfield, 2011.
6. Wildfang, 2006.
7. Ov. *Fast.* 6.291–4; Plut. *Vit. Num*. 9.
8. Cic. *Leg.* 2.29; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.20.
9. Wildfang, 2006: 51–2 offers an overview of many theories.
10. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.66; Plut. *Vit. Cam*. 20.3–6; Greenfield, 2011.
11. Oros. 2.8.13.
12. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 2.42; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 8.89.
13. Gell. *NA* 10.15.
14. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 4.44.
15. Aemelia: Livy, *Per.* 63; Cass. Dio, 26.87; Oros. 5.15; Tuccia: Val. Max. 8.1; Plin. *HN* 28.12; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.69.
16. Wildfang, 2006: 83.
17. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.67.
18. Plut. *Vit. Num.* 10; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.67.
19. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 9.40.
20. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 8.15.
21. Ulrich, 1976: 20.

Hispala Faecenia

1. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 39.5; 39.7.
2. Ibid., 39.6.
3. McGinn, 2004; Levin-Richardson, 2019.
4. McGinn, 2004: 9.
5. Zec, 2016; Abramović, 1974.
6. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 39.18; 15; Walsh, 1996.
7. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 39.15.

8. Ibid., 39.8.
9. Ibid., 39.10.
10. Ibid., 39.11.
11. Ibid., 39.12.
12. Ibid., 39.13.
13. Ibid., 39.15.
14. Ibid., 39.15–18; Takács, 2008.
15. *CIL* i2.581.
16. Ibid., i2.581.11–15.
17. Bauman, 2003: 33–7; Gruen, 1990: 65.
18. Schultz, 2006: 16; 83–92; Beard, North, and Price, 1998: 1.95–6.
19. Pairault-Massa, 1987.
20. Bauman, 1990 is the quintessential Livy WTF article.
21. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 39.19.
22. Treggiari, 1991: 63; Evans-Grubbs, 2002: 150–4.

Clodia

1. Cic. *Amic.* 5.2.6.
2. Cic. *Att.* 2.1.5.
3. Ibid., 2.9; 2.12; 2.23; 2.14; 2.22.
4. Ibid., *Att.* 2.9. Solonium is in Lazio.
5. Cic. *Mil.* 73; Plut. *Vit. Cic.* 29.5; *Vit. Caes.* 10.6; *Vit. Luc*. 34.1; 38.1.
6. Cic. *Cael.* 48.
7. Ibid., 18.
8. Ibid., 36–48.
9. Ibid., 38.
10. Ibid., 9.
11. Catull. 93. More precisely, the second line goes ‘nor know whether you are a white man or black’, but that has quite different connotations in the twenty-first century.
12. Catull. 16, ‘*pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*’.
13. There are other, more technical, arguments. Hejduk, 2008: 4–8; Skinner, 2011: 121–45.
14. Hejduk, 2008.
15. Catull. 15, 21, 23, 24, 48, 81, and 99.
16. For some reason this quote is attributed to Dorothy Parker but she definitely didn’t say it. It comes from a novel. Clarke, 2017.

Turia

1. *Laudatio Turiae, CIL* 6.41062 = Dessau, *ILS* 8393.
2. Alexievich, 2016: xiv.
3. Scheidel, 2007.
4. Mommsen, 1863: 566.
5. Cic. *Pro Tullio.*
6. *Laudatio Turiae* 3.7.
7. Cic. *Att.* 4.3 (Ep. 75 SB); Asc. *Mil*. C 33; Osgood, 2014: 37–8.
8. *Laudatio Turiae* 2a.
9. Ibid., 63. The translation is a combination of Osgood, 2014, and Wistrand, 1976.
10. App. *B Civ.* 4.15.
11. Both stories are from App. *B Civ.* 4.26.
12. App. *B Civ.* 4.44.

13. Val. Max. 7.2.
14. Plin. *HN* 20.3; 28.13; 28.18; 28.27; 28.77; 30.43; 30.44; 30.45; see Hug, 2014.
15. *Laudatio Turiae* 31.
16. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.25.7; Val. Max. 2.1.4; Plut. *Quaest. Rom*. 14; Gell. *NA* 4.3.1–2; 17.21.44; Plut. *Vit. Sull.* 6.11.

Julia Caesar

1. Suet. *Aug.* 62.
2. Ibid., 71.
3. Ibid., 64.
4. Ibid.
5. Levick, 1999.
6. 'My son do not ask about the immense grief of your kin; the fates will only show this man to the earth, and not allow him to live on. Gods above, it seemed you thought Rome's descent would be too powerful if these gifts had been hers to keep.' Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.870–4.
7. See Treggiari, 1991: 60–80, 277–98 on both these laws. All quotes come from her translations.
8. *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 8.
9. Milnor, 2005.
10. Suet. *Aug.* 64.
11. Suet. *Tib.* 7.
12. Tac. *Ann.* 1.53.
13. Cass. Dio, 55.9; Suet. *Tib.* 10; Tac. *Ann.* 1.53; Cass. Dio, 55.9.
14. Vell. Pat. 2.100.
15. Tac. *Ann.* 1.53; Suet. *Aug.* 65; *Tib.* 11; Cass. Dio, 55.10.
16. Macrob. *Sat.* 2.31.5.
17. Ibid., 2.31.9.
18. All these according to Suetonius in his *Life of Augustus*; Suet. *Aug.* 65.
19. Linderski, 1988. Based on some inscriptions which show that enslaved members of the household were of the Domus Augusta, which can only refer to Livia after Augustus's death.
20. Suet. *Tib.* 50; Tac. *Ann.* 1.53.

Cartimandua and Boudicca

1. Tac. *Ann.* 1.15.
2. Caes. *BGall.* 4.23.
3. *CIL* 920.8–9; Barrett, 1991.
4. Cass. Dio, 62.2.3–4.
5. Mattingly, 2007.
6. Tac. *Ann.* 12.36.
7. Tac. *Hist.* 3.45.
8. Braund, 1984; Braund, 2013.
9. Tac. *Ann.* 12.40.
10. Caes. *BGall.* 5.15–16.
11. From the Vindolanda tablets; *Tabulae Vindolandenses* 2.164.
12. Tac. *Ann.* 12.39.
13. Johnson, 2012: 35–8.
14. Tac. *Ann.* 14.31.
15. Cass. Dio, 62.2.1.

16. Ibid., 62.7.1–3.
17. Tac. *Ann.* 14.35.
18. Cass. Dio, 62.2.3–4.
19. Johnson, 2012: 113–116.
20. Cass. Dio, 62.6.
21. Di. 62.12.6.
22. Tac. *Ann.* 14.37.
23. Diod. Sic. 2.6–20; Braund, 2013: 118.
24. Tac. *Hist.* 3.45.
25. Tac. *Hist.* 3.45.
26. Tac. *Ann.* 12.37.
27. *Apocolocyntosis Claudii* 12.
28. Richmond, 1954.

Julia Felix

1. Plin. *Ep.* 6.16.
2. Ibid., 5.20.
3. Ibid., 6.20.
4. Particular thanks to Dr Sophie Hay for both bringing Julia Felix to my attention and being enormously helpful.
5. *CIL* IV.1136.
6. D'Ambra, 2021: 407.
7. Parslow, 1988; Harper, 2022.
8. D'Ambra, 2021.
9. Ibid.; Nappo, 1989.
10. Parslow, 1998.
11. Nappo, 1989: 89.
12. Parslow, 1998: 121.
13. Parslow, 1998.
14. D'Ambra, 2021.
15. Parslow, 1988.

Sulpicia Lepidina

1. Bowman and Thomas, 1983: 19.
2. Bowman and Thomas, 1983.
3. Peadon, 2006.
4. Tac. *Agr.* 28.
5. *Tabulae Vindolandenses* 2.291.
6. Ibid., 2.292.
7. Ibid., 2.190; 3.622.
8. Ibid., 3.581; 3.629.
9. Ibid., 2.180, 233, 302; 3.581.
10. Ibid., 3.593.
11. Mattingly, 2007.
12. *Tabulae Vindolandenses* 2.194; 3.596.
13. Allison, 2006.
14. Phang, 2001; Van Driel-Murray, 1997.
15. Van Driel-Murray, 1997.
16. Greene, 2013.

17. *Tabulae Vindolandenses* 3.581; Greene, 2013: 378.
18. Dolansky, 2011.
19. Van Driel-Murray, 1997.
20. Peadon, 2006; Van Driel-Murray, 1997; *Tabulae Vindolandenses* 32.118.
21. Sisk, 2012.
22. *Tabulae Vindolandenses* 2.248.

Julia Balbilla

1. Gibbon, 1897: 78.
2. Special thanks to Ali and Graham from Rex Factor, the best podcast.
3. Griffith, 1998. He does not appear in the *Iliad*, which only describes a few weeks at the end of the Trojan War.
4. Rosenmeyer, 2008.
5. Birley, 1997: 233.
6. Bernard and Bernard, 1960: 32.
7. Ibid., 83–93. Translation is adapted from Balmer, 1996: 109 and Rosenmeyer, 2008: 343.
8. Using Birley's chronology; Birley, 1997: 249.
9. Bernard and Bernard, 1960: 29; Rosenmeyer, 2008: 342. The full poem:
   Son of Dawn and reverend Tithonos, Memnon, seated opposite Zeus' Theban city,
   or [should I call you] Amenoth, Egyptian king, as the priests claim, learned in the ancient stories,
   greetings! And speaking out, favourably welcome her too, the noble wife of the emperor Hadrian.
   A barbarian man cut off your tongue and ears, the godless Cambyses. But surely, with his wretched death,
   he paid the penalty, pierced by the same point of the sword with which he, pitiless man, killed the divine Apis.
   But I don't think that this statue of you could ever perish, and I sense in my heart a soul hereafter immortal.
   For my parents and my grandparents were pious, Balbillus the wise and Antiochus the king:
   Balbillus was the father of my mother the queen, and King Antiochus was my father's father.
   From their race, I, too, have obtained noble blood, and these are my writings, Balbilla the pious.
10. SHA *Hadr.* 10.3.
11. Russ, 1983: 20–4.
12. Brennan, 1998.
13. Sen. *QNat.* 4a.1.13.
14. Paus. I.25.8; Kleiner, 1983.
15. *IG* II.2.3451.
16. Plut. *Mor.*
17. Rosenmeyer, 2008: 341.
18. Birley, 1997: 251.
19. Just this week I found it in *Bad Gays* by Huw Lemmy and Ben Miller, 2022.
20. Bowie, 1990.
21. Sappho 96 in Carson, 2003.
22. Rosenmeyer, 2008: 343.
23. Boehinger, 2021: 190–7; McArdle, 2020.

24. Hemelrijk, 1999: 162; Bowie, 1990: 62; Balmer, 1996: 21; Brennan, 1998: 213; Pomeroy, 1977: 57.

Perpetua

1. Plin. *Ep.* 10.96.
2. De Ste Croix, 1963; Sherwin-White, 2013: 196. done
3. As with everything relating to Perpetua, this date is up for debate, though you will find it in every single book and article about her. See Heffernan, 2012: 60–78 for a detailed discussion.
4. *Passio Perpetuae* 1, trans. Heffernan, 2012.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Tert. *De culti feminarum* 1.1.
7. Tert. *Ad martyras* 3–4.
8. *Passio Perpetuae* 4, trans. Heffernan, 2012.
9. *Acta Perpetuae* A VI: 4–6, trans. Cotter-Lynch, 2016: 49.
10. *Passio Perpetuae* 3; 6, trans. Heffernan, 2012.
11. Plin. *Ep.* 10.96.
12. *Passio Perpetuae* 15, trans. Heffernan, 2012.
13. Gold, 2018: 39–40.
14. Castelli, 1991.
15. Southon, 2008; De Nie, 1998; Corrington, 1989.
16. Methodius, *Symposium* Thaleia 9 based on Gal. 4.19 and I Cor. 4.15.
17. Hunter, 2015.
18. *Passio Perpetuae* 10, trans. Heffernan, 2012.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 13.
21. Gold, 2018.
22. *Passio Perpetuae* 18, trans. Heffernan, 2012.
23. Ibid., 20.
24. Ibid., 22.
25. Tert. *De anim*. 55.

Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea

1. Levick, 2007: 24–6; Birley, 1999.
2. SHA *Sev.* 15.
3. Levick, 2007.
4. Rockwell and Giles, 2009: 185.
5. Ibid., 187.
6. Cass. Dio, 78.2.
7. Ibid., 75.23–4.
8. *IGRom.* 4, 1287; Levick, 2007: 93.
9. Hdn. 5.3.9–11. Other opinions are available.
10. Cass. Dio, 75.32.
11. Ibid., 30.2.
12. Hdn. 5.3.11.
13. Ibid., 5.4.2–4.
14. Ibid., 5.4.2.
15. Sidebottom, 2022; Rantala, 2020; Icks, 2011.
16. SHA *Heliogab.* 4; 12.3.

17. Diod. Sic. 2.23–8.
18. Icks, 2011.
19. Gibbon, 1897: Vol. 1, 144.
20. Rowan, 2011: 246.
21. Cass. Dio, 80.9.
22. Hdn. 6.1.4.
23. Birley, 1999: 221–2; Icks, 2011: 57–8 for a different argument.
24. Cass. Dio, 80.1–5.
25. Ibid., 80.fr.
26. Hdn. 6.1.4–5.
27. BMC VI.142.
28. SHA *Alex. Sev.* 49.3–4.
29. *Epit. de Caes.* 24.5.
30. *CIL* 3, 7970; Levick, 2007: 152–3.

Zenobia

1. Ando, 2012; de Blois, 2002; Harper, 2017.
2. Southern, 2018.
3. Andrade, 2018: 216; Southern, 2008: 1.
4. Andrade, 2018: 62.
5. *CISem.* II.4202 in Dodgeon and Lieu, 1991: 4.1.2.
6. Dodgeon and Lieu, 1991: 4.2.2–3.
7. Andrade, 2018: 112.
8. Lact. *De mort. pers.* 5; Euseb. *Hist. Eccl*. VII.13; SHA *Valerian* 1.1–4.
9. Southern, 2008: 115.
10. Ando, 2012: 208.
11. Southern, 2008: 67.
12. Zonar. 12.24; Syncellus, 467; Zos. 1.39.2; SHA *Tyr. Trig*. 15.5–6; 17.1–3; Anonymous Continuer of Dion *FHG* IV.194; John of Antioch, frag 152.2; Dodgeon and Lieu, 1991: 4.5.1.
13. Andrade, 2018: 150–2; 166.
14. Ando, 2012: 209.
15. Andrade, 2018: 137.
16. Dodgeon and Lieu, 1991: 4.5.1; 4.5.4.
17. *CISem.* II.3971 in Dodgeon and Lieu, 1991: 4.5.5. The stone also includes a Greek version which is slightly different in the terms it uses for Vaballathus.
18. Southern, 2008: 95–7.
19. Eunap. *VS* 456.
20. Jerusalem Talmud Terumot 8.18.46b. Other sources think that Zenobia herself was Jewish, for unclear reasons.
21. Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 71; Andrade, 2018: 186–7.
22. SHA *Clod.* 13.2.
23. *CIL* III.4876; Hartmann, 2001: 267–8.
24. Procop. *De bello Persico* II.5.4–6. The site is also known as Birtha Asporakos. Edwell, 2007.
25. Southern, 2008: 92, drawing on Hartmann, 2001.
26. Andrade, 2018: 172.
27. Zonar. 1.44.1–2. Roman Arabia does not include the majority of the Arabian Peninsula. It refers to the area at the top of the Peninsula including the Negev and Northern Sinai deserts, chunks of Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Bostra is Bosra in modern Syria.

28. SHA *Tyr. Trig.* 15.8; 30.15. Cornelius Capitolinus is fictional.
29. SHA *Tyr. Trig.* 30.12.
30. Southern, 2008: 105; Andrade, 2018: 176.
31. Bland, 2011.
32. And also, by u/No_Window_8634, the God Emperor of All Mankind.
33. Bland, 2011.
34. Oros. 7.22.3–4; *Epit. de Caes*. 32.5–6.
35. SHA *Aurel.* 28.1–5; Zos. 1.54–56.2.
36. Zos. 1.56.2–3.
37. Etur. IX.12.2; Jer. *Chron.* Sa274.1–3 in Dodgeon and Lieu, 1991: 4.10.3.

Melania the Elder

1. My chronology of Melania's life is from Wilkinson, 2012.
2. Hopkins, 1965: 25; Yarbrough, 1976: 153.
3. Wilkinson, 2012: 180; Jer. *Chron.* 247D.
4. Olympiodorus, Fr.42 (Blockley, 1983).
5. Brown, 2013: 260.
6. Cooper, 1996.
7. Dunn, 2003; Görg, 2003; Wortley, 2019.
8. Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 89.2–3.
9. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 5.1.
10. Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 5–6; Wortley, 2019: 16.
11. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 23.3–5.
12. Ibid., 5.2.
13. Mratschek, 2012.
14. Paulinus of Nola, *Epistolae* 29.11; Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 11.3.
15. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 46.3.
16. Ibid., 46.4.
17. Ibid., 10.
18. Ibid., 55.2.
19. Ibid., 54.1.
20. Brown, 2013.
21. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 59.1.
22. Jer. *Ep.* 108.20.
23. Brown, 2012: 263.
24. Jer. *Ep.* 39.1.
25. Ibid., 45.3.
26. Ibid., 22.
27. Euseb. *Hist. Eccl*. 6.8. Matt. 19.12 reads 'there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'.
28. Clark, 1992.
29. Jer. *Commentarorium in Esaiam*, Prae.; *Ep.* 125.
30. Jer. *Ep.* 133.3.
31. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 55.3; Paulinus of Nola, *Epistolae* 29.13.
32. Egeria, *Itinerarium* 37.1–3.
33. Brown, 2012; Brown, 1961; Williams and Friell, 1994: 30–41; 90–117.
34. Yarbrough, 1976: 155.
35. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 54.5.
36. Ibid., 61; Gerontius, *Sanctae Melanie Junioris Vita* 19.

Galla Placidia

1. Halsall, 2007: 165–217 and Heather, 2005: 145–90 offer two very different perspectives on the matter.
2. Jer. *Commentariorum in Ezechielem Prophetam*, Prae.; Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 54.7.
3. Salisbury, 2015: 71.
4. Olympiodorus, fr. 6 (Blockley, 1983).
5. Procop. *Vand.* 1.2.27.
6. Salisbury, 2015: 77; Jord. *Get.* 30.
7. Salisbury, 2015 goes for the latter with some lovely, imagined descriptions of them sharing food and falling for one another by roaring fires; see Sivan, 2011 for a brief survey.
8. Jord. *Get.* 30.
9. Oros. 7.40.2.
10. Olympiodorus, fr. 24 (Blockley, 1983).
11. Sivan, 2011: 9–36.
12. Oros. 7.43.4–7.
13. Olympiodorus, fr. 26 (Blockley, 1983).
14. Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 3.30.
15. Olympiodorus, fr. 26 (Blockley, 1983).
16. Halsall, 2007.
17. Olympiodorus fr. 27 (Blockley, 1983). Technically, Wallia was Athaulf's successor's successor, as another guy managed to rule for a full seven days before being assassinated by Wallia. Halsall, 2007: 224–33.
18. Van Nuffelen, 2013; Jord. *Get.* 32; Olympiodorus, fr. 26 (Blockley, 1983).
19. Olympiodorus, fr. 33 (Blockley, 1983).
20. Sivan, 2011: 10.
21. Agnellus of Ravenna, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* John I: 41.
22. Olympiodorus, fr. 36 (Blockley, 1983).
23. Agnellus of Ravenna, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* John I: 42.
24. Collectio Avellana 28, trans. Sivan, 2011: 76.
25. Salisbury, 2015: 127.
26. Olympiodorus, fr. 33.
27. Salisbury, 2015: 137–8; Sivan, 2011: 90–1.
28. Sivan, 2011: 91 n.110.
29. Olympiodorus, fr. 42 (Blockley, 1983).
30. *CTh* 6.2.25; 10.10.33; 11.30.68; 1.4.3; 4.1.1; 5.1.8; 8.18.9–10; 8.13.6; 8.19.1; *CJ* 1.14.2; 1.19.7; 1.22.5; 6.30.8; Sivan, 2011: 126.
31. Sivan, 2011: 102.
32. Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2.8.
33. Halsall, 2007: 236–7.
34. Procop. *Vand. 3.15*; Heather, 2005: 281.
35. Salisbury, 2015: 9–10.
36. Sivan, 2011: 111–12.
37. Leo I, *Epistolae* 58, trans. Sivan, 2011: 134.
38. Leo I, *Epistolae* 56, trans. Sivan, 2011: 39.
39. John of Antioch, fr. 199.2, trans. Sivan, 2011: 153–4; Priscus fr. 17 (Blockley, 1983).
40. Sivan, 2011: 153–8; Salisbury, 2015: 190.
41. Plut. *Vit. Brut.* 44.2; Gibbon, 1897: 398, Carlyle, 1841: 217; Sneff, 2016.

42. See, for example, the gold solidus G3, RIG.473 in the British Museum, Sivan, 2011: 196.

Epilogue

1. Miles, 1974.

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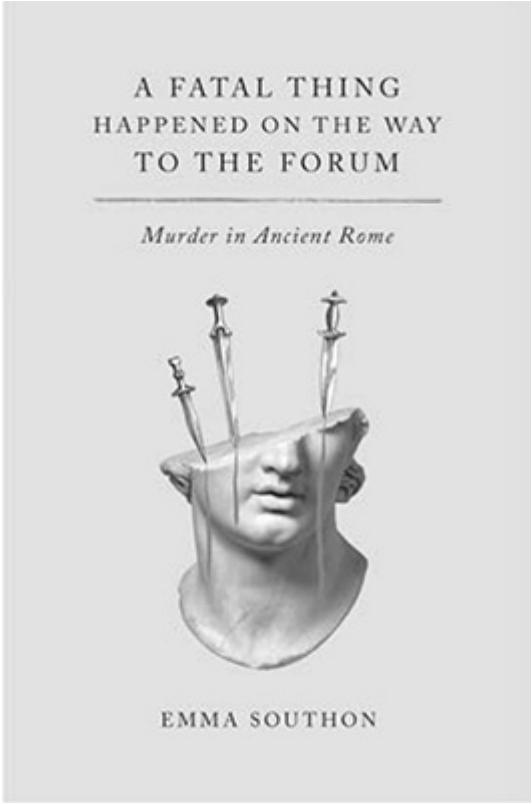

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